

屍鬼

SHIKI

小野不由美

一

新潮文庫



Shiki

Vol.1A

by Fuyumi Ono

Novel Updates

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creiz

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Translation Notes

General

Names

- In Japanese, names are typically given last name first. The character written as Muroi Seishin's first name is Seishin. They will typically write Western names in Western order, however (nobody calls John Smith by Smith John in Japanese, not even in formally written history books). In Japanese, people are more commonly than in English referred to by their last name, usually with an honorific. Referring to someone by their first name tends to imply either an adult talking to a child or familiarity/closeness (childhood friends Maeda Motoko and Yano Kanami; Ozaki Toshio and Muroi Seishin; current friends Mutou Tohru and Yuuki/Koide Natsuno, *etc.* do this, though in Natsuno's case there are special circumstances regarding his last name). Likewise, using no honorific either on a last name or a first name is either very brusque and rude or rather intimate.

Honorifics

- Most honorifics can be applied to first or last names, with the last name being the more formal choice. Not all are necessarily strictly to denote respect, as you will see, but declare relationships to people.
- san** - Respectful. Closest equivalent is the English Mr./Mrs./Ms., and it applies across all genders. It's used much more frequently than in English; fellow students who can and do refer to each other by lastname-san, whereas in English, referring to your classmate or in most situations even your coworkers as Mr./Mrs./Ms. last name would seem overly formal. It can also be used with first names. This is a major reason I've kept it as

-san rather than translating it as Mr./Mrs./Ms., as well as because the other honorifics don't have English equivalents even as close as that, necessitating the use of honorifics in general unless one just wants to lose that information in translation for no particular reason beyond laziness.

-kun - Most commonly used towards boys the same age or younger. Used on males the same age by either other boys or girls, it indicates less distance than -san without crossing into the brusque feel invoked by using one's name raw, without any honorific. Many teachers (and other adults) refer to older (middle or high school) female students as lastname-san and male students by lastname-kun, but it's not remotely unusual for girls to get the -kun treatment, especially in higher education (college, graduate school, etc.). In primary school or perhaps the first year or two of middle school, girls may be addressed as -chan depending on the teacher. Girls being referred to as -kun by their peers is fairly unusual. Girls are most likely to be -kun in specific situations, such as scientists in laboratories or other particularly

professional but not necessarily formal environments. It's almost always lastname-kun in this context, though in general,

particularly with boys, it can be used with a first or last name.

-chan - Diminutive, usually used on young girls and young boys, with the acceptable range for referring to boys with -chan being much younger. It tends to imply cuteness, so think of it as appropriate for the age range at which being called cute is still a compliment; most 10 year old boys don't really want to be thought of as cute, but a 19 year old girl would still probably be happy.

What age range 'young girl' refers to varies as much between people as what age they'd say one should refer to people with -chan. The older the one referred to it gets, the closer one's peers should be to use it with them. Adults will refer to younger girls with it as they please if they've known the target since they were very young.

Given everyone in Sotoba knows everyone in passing, most adults will be calling most young girls with -chan. Usually used with first names, given its nature usually comes with first name level intimacy, but it's not particularly strange for it to be appended to the last name. A boy who lets himself be referred to by this is either very childish or very easy going. Almost exclusively

in fiction, some boys will go by it to put off an air of being extremely approachable (Tohru in Shiki, Momo-chan-sempai in Prince of Tennis).

Nurse Ritsuko has her name shortened to Ricchan which lacks the hyphen due to a slight pronunciation difference. Ri-chan becomes Ricchan, which sounds almost the same beyond a slight hiccup of a pause between the i and the ch sound, based on the fact that it flows from the mouth more easily. It's written to denote that pronunciation difference, as Japanese is a phonetically written language, so I carried it on over thusly.

Those of you not familiar with the anime/manga to give you a mental image of each character will still probably be able to tell which nurses are younger based on who's -chan'ed.

-sama - Very respectful or reverent (or very sarcastic). Used by servants towards masters, appended to god's names, though also used by rabid fans about, say, their favored idol or celebrity.

-sensei - Denotes a professional, generally in a highly learned field. I'll usually translate this since translating it when used on Ozaki as 'Doctor' or a teacher as 'Professor' is entirely appropriate and natural in English with no information lost. It refers to anyone who's a professional in certain respected fields, particularly doctors, authors, *etc.* This includes manga artists, as in Japanese comics most writers are also the artists as opposed to Western comics where writers are not necessarily illustrators and vice versa. Ozaki is commonly referred to as Waka-sensei or Young Doctor (translated as Junior Doctor along with Seishin's waka-gouin becoming Junior Monk, because I think it sounds better and denotes that most of the village still thinks of them as son-of-predecessor more than having necessarily come into their own, a connotation ironically lost if left untranslated).

Some just call him Sensei, which is translated as Doctor.

Ozaki-sensei is translated as Dr. Ozaki. If anyone ever refers to Muroi as Muroi-sensei or sensei in regards to him being an author, I will keep it -sensei since English has no particular form of address used for authors.

-shi - Authors or other professionals are also referred to with **-shi**, but usually only when talking about them in a distant, remote sense. Very academic and stuffy, usually used for professional writing/analysis of a writer's works, citations, *etc.*

- **Onee-san (Big Sister), Onii-san (Big Brother)** -

While in English it's uncommon to refer to one's parents or grandparents by name, in Japanese it is also unusual to refer to one's older siblings by name. Just as in calling one's parents Mom and Dad, in Japanese it's more common to address older siblings with their title as well. These can become Onee-chan and Onii-chan instead, too, carrying the connotations of greater familiarity and warmth with -chan, but more respect and propriety with -san.

Mothers and father's forms of address have these too, but they can be more or less translated with variations on Mother, Father, Mom, Dad, *etc.* There's also the more uncommonly used

Aniki (big brother) and even more uncommon still **Aneki** (big sister), which are either old fashioned and precise without being formal or a bit abrupt; they're common yakuza terms and thus tend to imply a tougher (but respectful towards the 'sibling') class of speaker. **Aniue** and **Aneue** (Brother, sister) are highly respectful, proper terms of regard. To refer to one's older sibling by name is rather cheeky.

However, the terms for little brother or sister,

otouto and **imouto**, are not used as address so much as to designate relationships; "My little brother", or "my little sister." One could call their little siblings by those terms, but it will sound condescending and arrogant, or on occasion poetic/literary. "Oh, little brother, find happiness!"

- **Baa-chan/ Jii-san** - Commonly affixed to an old person's name, or used as a replacement for their name. These are the terms for grandparents, but are also used on non-related old people. The Baa terms refer to older women, the Jii groups to older men. While the -chan suffix is diminutive of names, it's more informal and/or friendly on the referential old person suffix. Baa and Jii are never used without a suffix -san, -chan, or -sama, though it can be doubled and used plainly to be particularly rude; Baba, jiji for old hag and old fart. The O prefix is respectful, but can still be used with -chan for a mix and match of both polite and friendly. Originally I was translating it as the

grandmother/grandfather/granny/grandpa/old woman/old man/old lady, but I'd like some feedback on readers if I should continue trying to do it that way or just give in and keep it Japanese.

School

- In Japan, primary school is 1st - 5th, middle school is 6th -

9th grade and high school is 10th-12th. I'll probably just translate them as their class year rather than "first year middle school" and whatnot, but sometimes there's only a vague mention that they're generally in middle school or high school, so these are the ranges for that. Classes are Monday through Friday with a half day on Saturdays. Also, summer vacation is usually from mid-July to the end of August; the school year doesn't start and end around this break, in Japan. Graduation and a new school year starts in March/April.

Family Register

The family register fills the roles of birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licenses, and the census in Japan. Statuses outside of death and birth, such as marriage and paternity, are not official until recorded in the family register. In the past, registrations were managed at Buddhist temples and to register with the state, it was required to register with and thus fund the temple. There were separate registers for different classes and certain outcast classes were not allowed to register. After the Meiji Restoration, all citizens were required to have last names (previously reserved for elite classes), the register was for all citizens, and registration was no longer tied to temples.

Japanese Faith/Spirituality Notes

Ono Fuyumi's degree is in Buddhist studies, which may or may not play a part in its heavy presence within the story. You won't be earning any degrees in Japanese religion by reading Shiki, much less with my meager cultural notes, but if I can explain it enough to foster less confusion and greater enjoyment, I've done my job.

If something is unclear, I haven't, so let me know and I'll endeavor to better detail it.

Buddhism, Shintoism, Temples, Shrines

- An extreme simplification of Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan.

Japan has a long history of blending their native religion,

Shintoism, with Buddhism. Shintoism is primarily focused on gods or kami who are supernatural spirits residing in nature, in events such as lightening or rain storms and even in man-made goods such as cups or tools; different spiritual beings warp based on various circumstances and legends into forms of monsters or supernatural creatures such as wily foxes or tengu. Despite a national ban on blending the faiths that lasted for a period, the two faiths are deeply entwined in daily Japanese life and in common practice and belief. The Buddhist establishment is called a temple in

translation, the Shinto establishments Shrines. There is no conflict in attendants of the Buddhist Temple also taking part in Shinto Shrine maintenance and activities; rather, doing one and not the other would be seen as slacking in faith-based activities. The Jizo, which have a Buddhist basis, are often in Shinto-based hokora. This is an extreme simplification, but there is much blending and feedback history between faiths to make for many variants of traditions and ceremonies.

For details on Shinto shrines specifically, see

[this entry](#)

in Chapter 2 regarding parts of a shrine.

Sotoba 卒塔婆

- Wooden grave markers of various heights ranging from the size of a child to taller than a grown man. Include a Buddhist sutra and a posthumous name determined based on the life of the person, usually determined by a Buddhist priest.

[Sample](#)

from Wikimedia Commons.

Sotoba 外場

- The village. The first kanji means outside, the second means place or field. Generally read gaiba to mean a field outside an area, the first kanji can also be read soto, so the town was named with that pun.

Essay

The other shore (Higan)

- Seishin's essay, the pre-prologue writing, mentions Higan, translated as 'the other shore.' In Japanese Buddhist lore there's the Sanzu river, the equivalent of the River Styx more well known in the West, that one crosses to reach the afterlife and must pay a six coin toll to pass. Higan is the shore of enlightenment.

Chapter 1 - 1

Shiki

- A made up term. Shi for corpse, ki as in oni or ogre or demon.

Curse

- The Japanese concept of a curse is at times a bit different than the common English use. In English, and at times in Japanese, it's a magic spell to make bad things happen. In Japanese, it is also frequently used to refer to the result of a strong emotions having a supernatural effect on the real world, for example, a dead person's obsession with someone causing the dead to come back or manifest as a spirit, perhaps not acting as their full and sane self, would be called a curse. In Shiki, a prayer with a gruesome ritual (burning the Bettou) is used to point out how similar a noroi (呪い) curse is to a majinai

(also 呪い) which is a charm or not-necessarily-evil magic spell, though a curse is technically always bad and a charm not necessarily so, that's quite subjective.

Japanese writing paper

- Novel mentions that Seishin still writes with this. It has squares that you fill in vertically.

[Sample](#)

from Wikimedia Commons.

Chapter 1 - 2

Hokora

- Small shrines, varying from the sizes of smaller than a dog

house to the size of a modest shed. While major gods or spirits are generally housed in the large shrines, hokora tend to be for minor, local or folk gods. They can be located at road sides or on the grounds of shrines established for more major gods. There are many variations based on the god or gods housed; common features include stone figures such as Jizo or large stones with various meanings.

There are also occasionally boxes for monetary offerings, or offerings of goods, food, drink, *etc.* can be placed about the hokora.

[Example](#)

from Wikimedia Commons.

Jizo

- A stone representation of the Bodhisattva seeking to guide people in the physical and spiritual world, often placed at road sides to

encourage choosing the right path. Commonly known as the guardian of children and pregnant women. Stones are commonly piled by the statues in the idea of lessening the burden on children who must stack stones in the underworld for good karma either for themselves or their parents. Stacking stones is said to represent building a stupa, a Buddhist symbol to help develop good karma; Sotoba gravemarkers are based on the concept of stupa, as well.

Sometimes a serene faced statue, other times a simple stone representation, often with a bib, Jizo have taken on many forms and purposes, not all of them necessarily representing the Bodhisattva but also representing gods at times.

An

[example](#) of a Jizo in a Hokora

from Wikimedia Commons.

Oni

- Supernatural beings of Japanese folklore, usually humanoid but with monstrous teeth and ogre like faces, usually colored red or blue. Usually bringing calamity and mischief, they can also be thought of as good luck in some contexts, and they're often placed in front of construction sites or buildings much like lucky gargoyles in the west. Men dressing up as them for ceremonies and parades to ward off bad luck is common.

Keyari

- A ritualistic thrusting spear with feathers.

[Example image](#)

from nihontou.

Mushiokuri

- Explained in detail in the text. Saitou Betto Sanemori became a vengeful spirit of insects eating rice plants due to his fall in battle being based on one of such plants in the fields. The story of Saitou Sanemori is also given quite a bit of

detail in text, and there are many Noh plays about him. Relevant to this story is the Noh play of the monk Tawami (the 14th Yugyou or successor to Ippen, the founder of the Ji sect of Japanese Buddhism). Tawami and two attending priests are performing ceremonies/chanting sutras at Shinohara, where two hundred years ago Sanemori died when his horse tripped over a rice root, leaving him open to enemy attack. He had lingered there at Shinohara as the image of an old man only Tawami could see. The priests perform a ceremony to help him release his shame and regrets to pass on.

Bettou

- It'll be a lot easier if you just think of this as 'lord', an honorific title with specific historical connotations, and go about your business. For those with a little more time:

Originally a term used in the feudal Japanese system of government to denote a government official who temporarily took on all of the duties of governing for another territory. Eventually came to simply mean the highest order of director or overseer in various government divisions from the Department of State which handled all secular affairs of government to the Department of Divinities. Due to the latter, in religious contexts it frequently refers to a monk/priest with administrative status. Other court members not related to governing would get the same titles for their courtly ranks in each specific division, including musicians, *etc.* so there could be many, many bettous in various fields and territories. Saito Sanemori was also known as 'Nagai Bettou' due to his stronghold being in the city of Nagai in the Musashi providence.

Yugyou shounin

- Literally Wandering Saint. It can refer to any wandering monk, but is strongly associated with the Toutakusan Muryoko-in Shoujoukou-ji sect of Buddhism, most often called the Ji sect, or Yugyou-ji for the 'wandering temple'. Yugyou Shounin is often another name for Ippen, the founder of said sect, such that he would be

the

wandering monk rather than a wandering monk, but his successive heads would also be called this at times. The wandering monk Taiku who attended to Sanemori in the Noh play of Sanemori was also called a yugyou shounin.

Yuge-shuu -

Based off of the term yugyou shonen, the first kanji 遊 is also

the symbol for play, also the first symbol in the word game, a word with special meaning in Buddhism. Game is said yuugi in standard talk, but the Buddhist meaning is pronounced yuge. Bodhisattvas, those who wish to save others before becoming attaining

enlightenment themselves, freely choosing to save others and enjoying themselves in doing it. Despite having reached

enlightenment, they "play" in the mortal realm to help others as it brings them happiness. In this way, to do something as play and to do something freely have similar meanings. In some sects of Buddhism, disciples and monks are encouraged to wander freely teaching and saving others, with a mindset like play. Thus, the reading for the mushiokuri act is Yuge-shuu, a play wanderer. The word yuge also means steam or vapor, making it a pun of sorts for the names of those 'smoking out' the village of insects.

Chapter 1 - 3

Obon, Bon

- A blend of Japanese Buddhism and folk traditions, it is a

holiday for honoring the dead, set at different dates depending where you are in the country, from the middle of July to the middle of August. It can be called Bon or have the 'O' formal honorific added to it to become Obon. Some consider the Bon season to last a full month with earlier preparations, grave cleaning, *etc.* being included. In Sotoba, it is stated to be from August 13th to

the 16th.

Many travel to their home towns to celebrate Bon, just as in New Years. That can be rather inconvenient though, so it's not unheard of just not to bother.

The exact nature of the celebrations vary from region to region, just as the dates, though universal factors include opening on the first evening, (

Mukae

or welcome) with fires made of burning hemp welcoming ancestor

spirits home or going to the graves with bon lamps and leading them to the family altar which has been prepared in advance, bon dancing (

Odori

or dance), and a send-off (

Okuri

or send off).

A common tradition with great variability is the construction of cucumber horses and eggplant cows. In some regions, they are both put out, facing the house, for the spirits to ride in on. In others, the horse is put out during

Mukae-bon

for a fast return and the cow during

Okuri-bon

for a slow return. The opposite also occurs, to express fear/respect of a lingering unsatisfied spirit.

[Example](#)

image from Musashi Restaurant.

Families tend to ancestor's graves and presenting offerings

before and during the main festival celebrations. As it is a religious festival, praying is a large part of it and some go house to house praying, or have monks come by to pray at the altars. It ends by floating lanterns down the river as if seeing off the visiting dead spirits. Sometimes, offerings are sent into the river

with them. Whether these include the horses and cows differs by region; sometimes they're just left at the riverside.

Shinkousai

- A Shinto festival for when the gods come visiting, literally

meaning "The festival of the pleasing of the gods." Parishoners carry three portable shrines said to house the gods for the duration of the festival around town to celebrate and please them, to ward off disaster. Takes place on July 17th.

Chapter 1 - 4

Radio Exercises

- In Japan there were, and still are though they're not as

popular now, radio broadcasts that people, especially old people and kids, exercise to, often in a public place where they get a stamped card each time they go. Especially popular in the summer when there's no school in session.

Japanese License Plates

- Just like American plates have the state the vehicle was

registered listed on the plate, Japanese plates have the prefecture or municipality where the license was issued listed on them. They also have serial numbers, three on top, four on bottom; the old people in Sotoba memorize them to identify cars from the village, same as one could presumably do with any other nation's set of plates.

[Sample](#)

from Wikimedia Commons.

Tengu

- From Shinto folklore, classified as either gods or demons, they are monstrous supernatural creatures associated with wars and less dangerously, mischief. Tied into Buddhism as well, they're seen to primarily target the cocky, as egotism does not mesh well with Buddhist principles. They are commonly seen in two types, a crow type that looks like a human-crow hybrid and the mountain type mentioned by Ozaki. Mountain tengu are said to be priests, specifically mountain aesthetes, who were corrupted by pride; they may still be basically good and repenting, or out to cause havoc.

Chapter 1 - 5

Kiyohara Natsuno

- Natsuno remarks that he was named after a Heian era (794 to 1185) noble; this refers to Kiyohara Natsuno (Kiyohara no Natsuno), a prince and politician from the Kiyohara clan. He was well trusted by the people and was heavily involved in writing the Ryo no Gige, a commentary on administrative code and government.

Takasago Pine

- There's a famous Noh play and legend about a monk who saw an old couple beneath a pine. The old man was raking up and saving the pine needles, representing good fortune, and the old woman was sweeping away the trash and unwanted debris, representing the bad things in life. The old couple tells the head monk that the trees at Takasago and Sumiyoshi are twin pines despite the distance between them, and that it symbolizes the far reaching imperial reigns as well as the flourishing art of poetry that will live on because all things from people to trees are at the heart of poetry.

The pine is green throughout all seasons and is said to be especially auspicious. It is soon revealed the old couple are the gods of the respective shrines where each of their pines reside, he at Sumiyoshi, she at Takasago. The man was Jou, the son of Izanagi, who fell in love with her, Uba, the maiden of

the Takasago shrine.

They died within minutes of each other and their spirits went into the two twin pines, where they continue to bless the shrines, poetry, and married couples, showing how love should flourish together into old age. The pair and the legend are fairly famous and seen in many works of art and traditional songs, particularly ones sang at weddings.

[Example Crest Image](#)

from Nanjai.

[Example image](#) of an actual pine at Takasago

from Wikimedia Commons.

Gateball

A game similar to croquette, where players hit balls with a mallet through goals on a field towards a center pole. Commonly associated with the elderly, also like croquette.

To 'Salem's Lot'

*Jehova spoke down, "What hast thou done?
Words of thy brother's lot calls to me from this earth,
thus art thou cursed and banished from this land.
This earth's open mouth has received thy little brother's blood,
by none other than your hand.
Thou shalt till thy lot on this earth without ever again reaping for thine efforts,
and a fugitive and a vagrant shall you become."*

——Book of Genesis, Chapter 4 (Translated from the Japanese Edition)

*And He said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto
me from the ground.
And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to
receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;
When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her
strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.*

——Book of Genesis, Chapter 4 (King James Version)

Prologue

The village is surrounded by death. What closes the village built upon the mountain stream into a triangle like a spear's tip is the forest of firs.

The fir resembles a Japanese cedar, handsome, yet short and stout. If a cedar is a sharp knife's edge, the fir is firelight. They have the contours of flame, burning thick at the wick's edge.

The hearty branches grow off of the straight and true trunk, the canopy forming a cone, the leaves are simple needles, and the only complexity to be found is that they don't grow in orderly rows but spiral. ---In summary, an unremarkable tree.

And yet it is a forest made exclusively of these firs that surrounds the village in death. They are the boundary of the village and they along with the mountain range that close off each side of the village are not of this world; they are Higan, the other shore.

While they look down upon the village from the other shore with their forty meter stature, their lifespan is only a one hundred and fifty to two hundred years. These are firs of destruction. If other greenery should try to spread, it is slaughtered to make way for more still of themselves who that dominate the forest.

Those trees of destruction are raised for the dead, confined to the mountainsides alongside the village. Villagers toil making use of the fir forest's lumber for sotoba, and later they became used to make coffins. Ever since the village was born, its purpose was to craft for the dead.

And in that forest of firs are, most befitting of the land of the dead, grave markers.

The village still buries its dead. The villagers each have their own plot and it is there that their remains will be buried. There are no tombstones. The sotoba stand marking where the dead dwell. Upon the thirty third anniversary of the dead's memorial service, the sotoba are taken down and a fir tree is planted. Plant and forget. The dead have already returned to the mountain, there is nothing human left.

A forest made purely of firs, the firs themselves destroyed for the dead, is unmistakably a land of death. Closed in on three sides by firs, the village is isolated within death.

Actually, from the moment the village was opened, neighborhoods within that village have been isolated. The first settlers were a band of lumberjacks who had come in to clear out an area for their forest, a village with neither blood nor territorial ties.

Perhaps that's the reason that everything is settled within the village, without aid from those who live outside the village. The outside's influence is limited, like the bypass through the south rim of the village, only able to pierce through and continue on. Even if this road connects the village to bigger towns and to cities even bigger than those towns, as nothing stops, the village remains isolated.

All the same, the mountain village has mysteriously not suffered depopulation in recent years. The population neither grows, nor does it decline. Certainly, there have been families moving bit by bit from the more remote part of the village, but that number is offset by the growth at the southern part of town. The mountain village always has a heavy population of seniors but as the elderly set off into the mountainside forests, the young return from thin air.

Seeing it carry on however trivially, yet certain never to close completely, the

village may be thought of as a hokora. No matter how abandoned it may seem, like the brand of faith that drives one to stop by the hokora when they happen to remember it, the pulse of the village will go on without end.

If that is the case then the stolidity of the inert mountain village may be intentional. A bridge between this shore and the other, it is surrounded on three sides by that other shore, by death that isolates this shore in solemnity, away from the common world.

There, people labor for death and pray for the dead.

---Really, that was what the village was for ever since it was born.

The first sight of light thought to be a fire in the north western mountainous region of the town of Mizobe was reported to their fire station, on November 8th a little past 3:00AM.

The temperature was 9.6°C, the humidity level - 62.3%, wind velocity - 12.8 meters per second, and there was a dry weather advisory so it wasn't unexpected that the fire alarm would sound.

With the receiver to his ear, Yoshino quickly tossed aside the magazine he was reading and hurried out front of his branch station.

The northern branch station was in the mountain ranges cloaked in darkness. During the day, the clear late autumn skies would likely be a backdrop to the green expanse of mountain ranges. Yoshino had seen it so often he could vividly call it to mind, the evergreen laden, rolling slopes that overlapped each other gently, and the shifting and mingling, vibrant colors of fall; those were the mountains Yoshino was accustomed to.

Now those mountains were a shadow cutting off the night sky's spread of countless scattered lights, lying beneath like a jet black shadow. As if they were stars fallen from the sky, small lights could be seen here and there, and whether they were always there was still unclear.

"Nori-san, do you see anything?"

Yoshino turned around at the voice of his nervous coworker.

"No."

A wind cold enough to chill the bone blew through. It blew through from the mountains towards the city. Struck by the dry breeze as it got under the collar of his uniform, Yoshino adjusted it absently, eyes still on the mountains.

The mountains of northern Mizobe made up about two thirds of the town. Most of the population lived in the remaining third of the town, concentrated in the urban area but a few small villages, considered a part of the town, dotted the mountains. The question was whether the 'light thought to be a fire' was in one of those settlements or not.

To be honest, it was fine so long as it was in a village. Each neighborhood was spread out amongst the mountains, isolated and with the old houses generally close together within narrow valleys. At least each village had their own fire squad and they would be aware of the risk of the dry weather warning. They would definitely have the water and the man power to handle it. They could fight a fire. What was truly terrifying was if it weren't that--if it were a fire coming from the mountains.

While cradling his body against the wind, Yoshino gazed steadily at the black mountain ridges. There were no particularly high mountains. They extended in an even flow of meager highs and lows. They were all mountains ideal for hiking, but the mountain ridges were complex and transportation within them was unexpectedly poor. The trees planted for harvest were mostly Japanese cedars and cypress but the underbrush was withered and it was dry enough to crunch on contact. Once a fire broke out in the mountains, the odds of it becoming a large scale fire were high. He remembered the large scale fires in Okayama and Hiroshima that summer.

(Please, just let it be a regular house fire.)

As if he had heard Yoshino's prayer aloud, his coworker spoke.

"Sure hope it's not a wild fire."

Yoshino nodded. Once a fire licked at the underbrush it would spread

horrifically fast. As soon a wide slope was overtaken with fire, it would be fanned by the thirteen meter per second winds, racing up and down countless mountain ridges and swallowing up the isolated villages throughout the northern mountains. And moreover, that wind was blowing down into Mizobe as if taking aim.

Yoshino had a nagging feeling as he looked up at the mountains, pulling his collar up further and shivering.

An express way was opened that ran through the southern mountain region. Due to the interchange, areas that were once nothing but rice fields were undergoing rapid development. The housing district built over the fields had taken up all of the level ground and continued to develop north, and now even the mountain slopes continued to be cleared. The mountains and the town merged together into one territory.

'Please,' he prayed without a word, without an addressee, when suddenly the alarm bell cried out. Yoshino turned towards the branch office in a panic. At that moment a young coworker came flying out of the office.

"I saw the light from above! It's from Sotoba!"

The fire engine ripped through the neighborhood north along the Omi river, into the mountain ranges spread out north of Mizobe. At least nothing unusual was reported from the mountains yet. The deep darkness of the mountains continued but that was all that could be seen of them.

Beneath the indigo night sky, black slopes flowed. In the quiet of the pre-dawn highway, the fire engine met with a sudden gust of wind as if the wind remembered to blow as soon as the engine was out of the city streets, but they met with not so much as a shadow of an oncoming car.

The seemingly tranquil night, the seemingly monotonous mountains, both of them were in their own way trying his patience. The road twisted and curved back along itself, along the river and the mountain ridges. There were no recklessly steep mountains but the will to dig tunnels or flatten the mountains had waned over time. As a result, even while going towards the northern villages, you had to turn south at several intervals. Meanwhile, a spreading fire didn't care about something like that. Fires just pushed on straight ahead with

the wind.

Thinking about that, every curve made his stomach ache. Continuing with dogged determination along the mountain as best they could, at last ahead he could see the light of the expressway. That brilliant illumination shone straight ahead, passing over the top of the valley.

On the northern side of the mountain that rose from that valley was Sotoba---the former Sotoba. What should have been Sotoba. In the valley of the river were about four hundred homes. The population was just over 1,300, the largest of the villages in the mountain ranges.

"We can't see anything yet."

Yoshino nodded at his young coworker's voice.

"If it were daybreak, we might at least be able to see smoke but..." Yoshino answered when it struck him. Before the call had come in, he was just reading a certain magazine. It had been left behind by one of the squad members, Maeda, who had died just last month. Maeda lived in Sotoba. He remembered him bringing in the magazine, bragging that one of the authors was from Sotoba. That was about half a year ago. He said it was an essay written about Sotoba, seeming delighted as he opened it to the carefully marked page to show it off. Yoshino had taken that magazine off of the back of the shelf by chance.

Had Maeda died of illness? He should have been about Yoshino's age if not younger. His family came for his things, taking all of his personal belongings aside from the magazine left behind in the depths of the shelves.

While remembering as much without knowing why he was remembering it, Yoshino focused on the radio. It seemed headquarters didn't know the particulars yet either. Not only didn't they know the conditions on the scene, they didn't even know specifically where the fire was, so of course there were no details.

Yoshino asked one of the brigade members in the passenger seat, "We still haven't heard from Sotoba's fire brigade?"

The crew members looked towards the radio.

"It seems no one is at the post."

"Impossible!"

There was a dry weather warning. A fire could break out at any time. Each fire brigade was advised to be on alert, so somebody should have definitely been at the station.

"Their brigade chief?"

"Our office has tried to call him at home, but as expected nobody seems to have answered."

"I figured as much but..."

Yoshino clicked his tongue lightly. Strictly speaking the fire department and the fire brigade were separate units that worked alongside each other. The fire department gave instructions but they weren't a monolithic entity, so it wasn't as if they were as in tune with them as they would be their own limbs.

"You don't think the station and the chief's house are already up in flames, do you?"

Yoshino's brows knitted together as his young coworker said that, unsure if it was fear or a joke. If things had gone that far then they should have received word from Sotoba beforehand. Even so, he couldn't keep from imagining the worst in his mind. What if there was no chance to make contact in all of the chaos?

They drove around another curve. After crossing one more ridge, there was a field opening up towards the north. The bridge connecting to the national highway came into view. Beyond the expressway lit up as bright as broad daylight was the lacquer black mountain. Beyond that was chaos. In the darkness of their path were points of red light, scattered, glowing sparks.

Yoshino was not alone, the entire group in the engine cried out. They knew that the worst had happened. It wasn't a simple house fire. It was unmistakably a wild fire. Even with the well-lit expressway, they could tell by how many points of light there were that it was of no ordinary scale.

"This can't be...." Somebody mumbled. The team member in the passenger's

seat reported the conditions fitfully. They needed backup. With its size, with this wind, it was far beyond the branch office's capabilities.

How long would it take to extinguish it (it would be more appropriate to express in days no doubt), and how much of the mountain village would be destroyed by the fire, and how many victims would there be?

As Yoshino's fist balled in his lap, he saw the headlights of an approaching car. Yoshino ordered for the driver to slow. He leaned out of the window and waved his hand in a wide motion at the approaching car.

It was an unremarkable station wagon. As the two came closer, they stopped over the center line. Yoshino opened the door and leaned halfway out. The driver of the station wagon rolled down the window.

"Hey you, did you come from Sotoba's direction?" Yoshino's voice carried on the wind. He didn't see anything in the wind that resembled ash or smoke, but the air was mixed with the distinct, burnt stench of a fire.

The driver gave a disinterested nod in response to Yoshino's question. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties to mid-thirties. In the low light his facial expression couldn't be made out clearly but he didn't seem to be in any sort of disarray. But, his face and clothes were filthy as if he had been rolling in mud. For just a moment, Yoshino thought that dirt was splattered blood. It was surely just that the light reflecting off of mud made it look like blood. ---That had to be it.

"What's happened to Sotoba? Do you know anything?"

The driver's voice was lacking in emotion (perhaps from exhaustion) and quiet but it carried on the wind.

"It is a wild fire. Fire started on the northern mountains and came down to the village."

Yoshino groaned. "How big?"

"It's horrible. Embers are falling like snow."

---It was the true and honest worst case scenario.

"What was the Sotoba branch doing?" someone was heard cursing. The other

members reported to headquarters. Yoshino raised his hand in thanks to the driver. The driver drove on. While closing the fire engine's door to do the same, seeing the station wagon off, Yoshino swallowed in a gasp.

In the backseat of the car was stored a coffin. It was only for a moment, but it was so distinct that his eyes were drawn to it. Indeed, it was a simple wooden casket. The image was fully burned into his eyes; the back seat was fully reclined to accommodate its size, and a cloth of some sort was wrapped around half of the coffin, which had one small window, with double doors adorned with tassels.

Yoshino saw the car off, mouth agape. For a moment he thought to chase after and yell at them to stop but his shoulders quickly eased. ---Yes, a casket. There was nothing wrong with that.

Sotoba was originally a village founded for the creation of sotoba and caskets. Judging by the driver's appearance, the scene was clearly chaotic. He may have just grabbed whatever was on hand at his shop, the coffin, and packed in his valuables to flee, or maybe it was a coffin that was previously packed into the car for delivery.

He still felt somehow uncomfortable but it was no time to get caught up too deeply in that. More important to Yoshino than a station wagon with a coffin in it was the fact that Sotoba had many woodworking plants and sawmills.

The fire engine was again heading north on the national highway. They passed beneath the expressway's overpass, taking the single curve along the mountain stream and drove higher bit by bit until they could see an unobstructed view of the village of Sotoba.

Looking at it straight on, one face of the northern mountain was already in flames. He could tell that the red flames had completely overtaken the territory beneath the man-made forests. The reason the mountain ridges had appeared black was because it was in shadow, illuminated by the other side of the mountain. The origin of the fire must have been further north in Sotoba, and the other side of the mountain may have already been wrapped in flame.

The smell of the fire reeked inside of the fire engine, smoke wafting in. Before their horrified eyes, flames rose over the block of the mountain. The firs fell to

the flames. The buildings on the northern slant were already enveloped, and the headlights of cars escaping the area drifted like will-o-the-wisps.

Sparks fell. No, it wasn't as simple and gentle as to be described by the word 'fall.' It was like a blizzard fanned on by the fierce winds.

It was a more disastrous scene than they imagined, and he heard those who road with him raise their voices and groan. What did anyone think one single pump truck rushing on to the scene could do?

--Of course, there was nothing at all that they could do.

This disaster wasn't the start of something, it was a demise. This past summer everything had been progressing to this state in secrecy; this was the culmination of all of those threads.

No, according to some, it had started even before that---the past year, no, maybe even further back than that. At any rate, the unavoidable began in the summer, on the early dawn of July 24th.

Already on that day, it was half set in stone that the village known as Sotoba would be wrapped in the one thousand hectares of mountain forest that surrounded it and annihilated.

Chapter 1

Part 1

The desolate earth froze solid over itself into countless
meandering ridges.

The grey sky hung low, the universe split perfectly in two parts,
the clouds and the earth.

All that traversed the two was the wind, like a blade; there was no
light in the sky, to say nothing of the earth. Nevertheless, a pure splendor
closed in on him from behind, and as he bowed his face low to avoid the wind,
before his line of sight was cast a long, deep
crimson shadow.

He didn't know whether the red that tinted that shadow was the
earth itself or whether it was an effect of the curse he carried in himself.
What he did know was that it would be bound to his ankles eternally, until the
day he died and decomposed into refuse, it
would probably never leave him. No, even after he rotted away,
perhaps the slivers of waste would continue to cast their own
crimson shadows.

All that moved on that deserted and desolate earth were he and the
spirits of the dead. His forehead bore a mark and as the dead
spirits did not know its meaning, they blew cold winds his way, or they would
spit poison at him, or with their half transparent hands they would throw
pebbles.

----You cursed wretch.

The dead spirits kept their distance but still, transparent,

stalked after him. No matter how dull it may have been the light of day
showed their hazy forms. Though they had no shadows, their

voices carried clearly on the wind.

---You cursed wretch.

---Outcast.

Under the weight their jeering voices and at the stones that rolled

beneath his feet, he fell--how many times was this now?--to the

cold, hard earth, like a stone.

He pushed both hands to the ground to raise himself up, first

peeking beyond his arms to the brilliant light. Situated atop the

low hill, the greenery of the hill shone far and wide. The hometown to which he could never return was there, emanating its distant

glow.

The light at the peak of the hill spread light and love over that

entire hill, the greenery a warm, glowing hue, but on this earth

there was nothing cast but shadows.

This was the land of wanderers; the vegetation fostered by this

light would never flourish here. A cold that seemed to freeze solid even the wind itself pierced him, without so much as a hair's

measure of that warmth coming down. That light only served to cast relief of the hobbled texture of this land, to cast shadows--dense, shadows the color of sin, garnishing anything and everything.

----Outcast.

Again, the stones and pebbles came flying. He closed his eyes and

stood up with a single breath but, unable to forget the light that seared itself into his pupils, beneath his eyelids, when he opened his terrified eyes this time, the splendid sight's radiance

reflected still on the clouds.

The day grew dim yet the clothing of the spirits of the dead

remained vivid, by the brilliant light behind him that itself did

not dim. He had done nothing but walk for countless days now

through the wasteland and yet, the light never weakened, his hometown on the hilltop never faded beyond the dips and rises of the earth behind him. He did naught but walk. He struggled and yearned for a place where neither the hill nor the light would be seen.

Before long before him was a human figure, faint and white. It had been there since before, waiting for him. Pallid blue will-o-the-wisps wavered, gathering as a shadow at his feet. He gasped as he made out the features of that figure. It meant that night had come again.

This was the appointed time for it to come to the wasteland. It followed him, and until the clamor of the dead spirits came with the dawn, it was unlikely to leave his side. He already knew that he could neither escape it nor drive it off. Without choice, he walked. Whether he stood still or whether he changed directions, he would surely end up reaching its side.

He himself without intent took a narrow walk step by step, until the figure's contours were clear. His feet stopped and he covered his face.

That was his brother who he had slain. It was his little brother, born after him, the little brother to whom everything he himself had wanted had come so easily.

He buried his brother in the ground, and within a fortnight all greenery was eliminated. He'd meant to bury his sorrows together with that corpse on the hill. The light of the splendor that shone over the grave dimmed with sadness, and the surrounding trees and flowers bloomed only at night, the birds in the branches wailing only the same song.

It came, revived from the grave again tonight.

----A Shiki.

Having written that much, Seishin gave a sigh. In that moment the

tension eased as he was thrown from the frigid wasteland back into the middle of the summer night.

The temperature seemed to rise instantly. Seishin released his

pencil. The old style lacquer hexagon rolled above the wasteland

confined to the squares of the writing paper, reflecting the light of the lamp. The traditional Japanese writing paper spread out over the inorganic clerical desk that wore the reflection of the lamp

like an egg yolk and from the window at the side of the desk, the

summer temperature and the sound of insects flowed into the

room.

Sunday, July 24. The date had just changed, and Muroi Seishin was

just shy of 33. He was a monk and an author. Facing his desk in the temple office, before his eyes was spread the manuscript that had

come from about five hours of transcription.

Seishin sighed again, taking up the sheet of paper he had just

filled. He looked over the letters he had written into the squares from the beginning.

The lively hum of insects flowed in through the temple office

window. Loud as that should have seemed, the room was mysteriously stagnant with silence. In the old styled room, beneath the light

that just barely covered the whole of the desk, there was only

himself with his head bent down towards the manuscript, closing

himself off to all else. Behind him silently stood the steel desk

and office supplies. The head monk's family slept in their

quarters. The temple that held them in its breast was filled with

emptiness in the space beyond that, all human presence cut out.

Surrounding the temple was a forest of fir trees. The temple was on a mountainside covered with firs, with no adjacent houses. The

village spread out beneath the view of the temple was itself alone in the mountains, closed in by fir trees. Such overlapping layers

of isolation were pooled within the temple office.

(The little brother, he feels for him...)

Seishin returned the paper to the desktop with another faint sigh.

He took a box cutter from the office desk and took up the abandoned pencil, running the blade along it. The pencil shavings fell onto

the manuscript he had just engrossed himself in.

The little brother had become a Shiki in death but he was by no means a vengeful ghost, much less by any means an evil apparition.

The little brother had simply risen from the grave, that's all.

Thus the little brother, just as when he was alive, oozed with compassion towards him. But there's nothing that can torment a criminal more than a victim who commiserates with his assailant. He anguished in his little brother's compassion.

----And did what, then?

Seishin could only ponder, following the story he could only follow

vaguely, until at last he was caught up in confusion at its

ambiguity, losing sight of where it was going.

While repeatedly fumbling for something in his writing, he shaved

the long end of the pencil down to a precise point. The lead was

2H; he had a habit of writing characters as if engraving them with the hard pencil. So while he used a pencil, he didn't use an

eraser. The way he used it, the characters wouldn't disappear so

when it came time to erase something, he'd end up ruining the paper itself.
(The murdered little brother rises from the grave every
night.)

That compassionate little brother's older brother attained the
title of murderer when he took up a weapon against him. More than
himself who had been killed, he sympathizes with the older brother who
killed him.

That's why he became a Shiki and pursues his older brother. He has
to follow his brother who had become a sinner wandering the
wastelands to his final destination.

This was not a curse driven by affection.

The little brother who became a Shiki doesn't know that he's
tormenting his older brother. The older brother knows as much.

And---where is this going?

As he thought, he sharpened the pencil to a point and went on
sharpening the other pencils he had used that night. Much as he
hated dull tips, he couldn't simply keep sharpening them
constantly, so he kept a dozen of them reliably in a pencil tray to trade out
whenever the tip became rounded.

The rainy season had ended but the stillness of the night that

seemed to flow piercingly into the room had nothing to do with the heat.
Rather, one would feel a chill in a short sleeved shirt. A

mountain town laid out along the mountain stream was not one fated to
sultry summer nights. There was a notable difference from the

town he had lived in while going to college. In his dormitory room without air
conditioning, just sitting at his desk would have him

dripping sweat. Just like now, he would be bent over the writing paper into the dead of night, when a bead of sweat would smear the ink, making him wince; he'd stopped using pens. For ten years since, he'd used hard, thin lined pencils.

Which editor was it that had mentioned with surprise 'You still use

Japanese writing paper?' Seishin replied that his nature didn't mesh well with machines. He'd tried buying a word processor but he ultimately ended up giving it to his father. He didn't hate precisely pounding out the letters but somehow he didn't like the way that they could be easily redone.

Filling out each square on the traditional Japanese paper was

similar to taking a path without being able to retrace one's steps.

If you lose yourself in a dead end, you'll have to return to a branch road. And then, step by step, he wrote as if traversing a maze by foot, a way of doing things that was most like himself. It took time but, Seishin was first and foremost a monk after all, so writing was nothing more than a side business. He was never enough of a top seller that publishers would press him to hurry in

finishing his manuscripts, and he likely never would be. Things had gone this way for ten years and while he didn't mind, he didn't

doubt that it would continue like this from now on.

Finished sharpening his last pencil, he gathered the shavings in

the middle of the paper and folded it around them. He folded the

paper into itself so as not to spill what was in it before putting it in the wastebasket. Because of his habit of handling anything

and everything this way, his mother and others had laughed that

they couldn't tell if he were throwing something away or storing it away. Spreading out a fresh sheet of paper, Seishin stood up. He was

getting faint goose bumps. As he moved to close the window, as if frightened by Seishin's shadow, the bugs suddenly ceased chirping. Because of that, he faintly heard the vague sound of a gong sounding. The sound which sounded like a preparation to flee, which sounded melancholy, was the sound of the mushiokuri bells. Seishin smiled faintly at the clear notes of the bells. Night fell fast on the village. At a time when most would already be asleep, so many people set out, still making a hustle and bustle, continuing the night's festival. Long ago, he had a feeling that the night held a secret. He had had a feeling if he could follow those men who dawned their masks and went on parade, he would find it. Unfortunately Seishin was over thirty and he knew the truth of what hid in the night. But even now many children probably followed after the procession, rubbing their sleepy eyes, in search of something. He remained unaware that with that thought, the year before, or the year before that, he too had believed that something had to be out there as the sound of the bell jolted through his chests. He looked casually out at the village, sunken into the darkness. The dotting of houses and street lamps could not wipe away the darkness. Maybe it was because of those very forlornly sparse points of light that the village was all the darker. The darkness that towered as if to consume the village was made up of mountain ridges covered with firs. The stars spread out vividly across the tabernacle of the sky, immeasurably brighter than the view down at the mountain village. The village is surrounded by death.

The firs were death. The villagers still buried their dead here.

The dead who harbored regrets or resentments would rise from the grave and linger, bringing calamity. The village called them "Oni."

Death would infect those touched by the Oni. Humans and livestock would die and crops would wither. The Oni come when children cry, parents would tell their children in the past, and even now.

The Risen, corpses that spread death as they lingered. They awoke within the firs, coming down from the darkness of the mountains swarming towards the sparse lights, towards those who were engrossed in their dreams.

(This darkness...)

Behold this darkness.

The stars above the mountain rage.

What is the darkness, compared to the splendor of the stars? The sage upon the hilltop pointed to the wasteland.

This is the darkness of avidya, of ignorance, this darkness is filthy and cursed.

Saying this as he motioned, the sage pushed him from behind. He staggered on the bellows of his feet out into the wasteland, the narrow golden gate closing behind him.

Seishin shook his head and rested his hand on the window.

Since he had started it, he had been harboring doubts, doubts about being unable to see the end point of this story, doubts about why he started writing this story at all. Bits and pieces fell into place, bit by bit, obscuring the focus of the story.

Seishin smiled bitterly at himself and moved to close the window

when from that direction, just barely breaking through the darkness was a glowing point of light. From years of experience, Seishin

knew that he was looking at the divergence from the national

highway to the road along the river. The lights moved. It must have been a car.

Furrowing his brows, he checked his watch. At some point it had

become 3:00AM. The lights in the village went out as they would and the sound of the bells grew more lonesome as they would, the climax of the festival having passed and going into its denouement.

Villagers couldn't participate in the denouement. Being a ceremony to ward off insects and plagues, the people could only see them

off, unable to be present for the ending. The only ones who could

be present were those "inhuman" ones who donned the masks.

(At this hour...)

The light came from the highway directly towards the town. From a

distance it could still be told that they were the headlights of

three cars.

The reason he watched over the sight so intently may have been

because how rare it was to see a car coming to or leaving the

village at that hour.

Three car lights were...

Drawing arcs in the darkness, as if drifting, they traveled the

land. A beckoning, invoked by the the dead who rose from the grave, he who dispatched the will-o'-the-wisps.

Seishin shook his head brushing off the phrase that had floated to

mind.

As he casually closed the window, he noticed the lights had

stopped.

Part 2

The mountain village was coated jet black, even the asphalt roads lost to the darkness. There were streetlights lining the roads but the lights were dimmed, with little more light from them than the reflection of the night dew. The faintest light splayed on the asphalt, hazily bringing out the white line that denoted the roadway.

Beyond the white line that looked as if it were being sucked into the darkness was a gloomy glow. At the side of the road, near the bridge, a shrine was erected. Countless candles stood around the hokora's stone Jizo, flames flickering in a wind that may or may not have been blowing. That shadowy light shone on the expressionless, half-lidded statue and the oddity that stood beside it.

It was a sotoba about the height of a child.

On the face of the sotoba was a cramped, glued on cut out of a white paper doll. The candle lights crosshatched patterns across the paper dolls, the lights flickering on the paper, shadows dancing as if the doll were writhing. ---Far away, the bell tolled.

The sotoba waited. Illuminated by the lights offered to God, awash in the voices of the insects and frogs, waiting there among the noises mixed then with the faint sound of the bell, it stood in silence.

From the darkness the sound of the bells drew closer. The pounding of drums, vigorous as if as necessary as breath, sounded. There was the dry, pounding noise and a crowd's footsteps.

The wind blew, swaying the candles. The dancing light and shadows changed the Jizo's expression. At last torch light appeared over the hokora.

Black shadows leaped up from the ridges between the rice fields to the asphalt. The numerous flames drew circles in the darkness, beating together and joining with a clash and a shatter of red embers. Those falling lights illuminated their grotesque forms.

They wore masks with short white cloths beneath them. Black monk robes. The Oni who covered their face with old fashioned hand towels carried many huge planks of sotoba on their backs. As they danced, the paper dolls crammed onto the child sized sotoba swayed.

The sounds of the insects were cut short as if seized with fear. The sound of the gongs, the sound of the drums, the sounds of the torches beating together mingled with the sound of the mountain stream. The bullfrogs' croaks were clearer than the sound of the insects.

The Oni waved the torches, their offerings. Bearing down under the weight of the sotoba, they still took what were either long strides forward or small leaps, they bobbed up and down, sounding the bells and the drums as they swaggered over the night streets. The Oni at the head of the procession shouldered a straw figure about the size of a child, crucified at the highest point at the end of the rod.

The red Oni came to the front, waving the effigy like a keyari and stopped before the hokora. There were about twenty Oni who followed after, banging their torches, leaping and dancing past. Sweeping up the offering before the Jizo, they descended the stone steps towards the river valley. The red Oni with the effigy took up the sotoba from the side of the hokora and followed after. In the river valley where the water level was low were three effigies prepared and waiting to be burnt.

The bells and the drums fell silent as if they'd finally solved their crisis, muttering off to a finish that washed over them with a sigh of relief.

"Thanks for your hard work, men!"

An old man called out with a distinctly clear voice. One man took off his mask and sighed heavily.

"Good grief."

Following in suit, about twenty others shed their masks and lowered their burdens. The effigies, the sotoba, piled over the open air fire as if to hide the flames within the small mountain they formed. They chucked their torch lights on top of that pile, offered to the gods. The flames mingled and overtook the dolls, forming one single blaze that shone over the river valley and the faces of

the surrounding people.

Seeing the others had done so, Yuuki at last took off his Oni mask. Giving a heavy sigh of relief that at last his torment was over, he took a seat on a nearby rock. He covered his face with a hand towel, wiping away the sweat and shaking his head to wash his face in the night breeze.

"Whew, good work."

Yuuki turned his head towards the voice to find a beer thrust out towards him, which he did take. As he wiped at his face with the black cloth, the man in the strange getup gave him a broad smile, and he couldn't stop a smile from welling up himself at the peculiarity of that disguise, even after all of this.

Mutou may have guessed the reason for Yuuki's smile, going "Ah," as he took his hand towel. Wiping at his sweat with a beer still in one hand, he took a seat next to Yuuki. Mutou's face was red. The man was normally the very picture of sober propriety but on the rare occasions he was of particularly good humor, you could be sure he was drunk. He must have found marauding around town to be a fitting occasion for drink. The beer he was brought was wet in his warm hand. It must have been dunked in the river to cool it.

"So? Bet you're worn out." Mutou spoke,

Yuuki nodded.

"This is what they mean when they say your legs are stiff as rods. I didn't think the mushiokuri would be this big of a thing."

"It's hard labor, being a yuge-shuu. The first time I was a part of the yuge-shuu, I can't remember how many times I thought about giving up halfway and running home," said Mutou with a laugh. "But, well, this's what the men do. Until you take part in the festival, you're just a visitor."

Yuuki nodded.

Yuuki moved to this village--to Sotoba--about a year ago. It wasn't that he had any family here. He had just wanted to move to the country and so he had an acquaintance make arrangements for a house in Sotoba. But there weren't many who came to Sotoba that way. At least as far as Yuuki knew, there was only Mutou, here. Mutou worked in the business office of the one and only

hospital in the village. It seemed he moved into a house in Sotoba from nearby about the time his oldest child was in middle school. It wasn't as if nobody ever moved in from the surrounding neighborhoods but, those who did tended to have blood ties to the town. In that sense, Yuuki and Mutou were oddities.

"Is that so, this year is Yuuki-san's first time?" It was a quiet voice. The man was seated on a nearby stone and was looking to Yuuki. "Well, then, it really will wear you down, won't it?"

"Indeed," nodded Yuuki as he remembered, he was fairly certain, that the man was Hirosawa, a teacher at the middle school. "But with this out of the way I finally feel like I'm a member of the village proper now, too."

As Yuuki spoke, Hirosawa took another beer in hand and came closer.

"It will be about one year won't it, since Yuuki-san moved here? To open an art studio, wasn't it?"

"It isn't something that fancy. Azusa--that is, my wife and I do carve wood furniture, and dye and weave cloth---but really, it's just a place for us to do that in."

Hirosawa smiled, but Mutou made a face and thrust his can out at Yuuki.

"That right there! You and your wife being complicated, keeping separate names, that's why it took a whole year to get involved in the rituals. Villagers can't understand that kind of progressive thing."

Yuuki forced a smile. Their houses were somewhat nearby and Mutou had looked over him since they'd first moved in but as soon as liquor was added to the mix, conversation would turn to this topic.

He lived with Azusa as a family without marrying her, without entering her in his family register. Azusa refused to change her family name. He understood her feelings and Yuuki himself had a few doubts about the institution known as marriage, so there was no need to enter her into the family register. He didn't call her his wife, he called her his housemate. They did have one son but the way things ended up was that their son was entered under Azusa's family census, with Yuuki's approval. It seemed the people of Sotoba couldn't understand that at all. Apparently the speculations about them ran wild when

they'd first moved in.

"Ah well, the villagers seem used to it now, so isn't it fine?" Hirosawa smiled gently. "Your son is certainly coming along, isn't he. He's gotten so big---this year, he started high school, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes. We had my son while in college. Did you look after my son at the middle school?"

"No, I had no connections to him. Just, sixteen, huh? He's at the age where he should understand his parent now, isn't he!"

"That he is," Yuuki laughed. When he was smaller, there would be misunderstandings and it seemed like he was picked on and he'd complain that he wanted them to get married properly but, ever since he'd entered middle school he hadn't said anything of the sort. Yuuki took that to mean that he finally understood what his parents aim had been.

"With that kind of life style, aren't there a lot of parts of country life that don't sit well with you? For example, women not taking part in the ceremonies or such."

Yuuki shook his head lightly at Hirosawa's question.

"It isn't like that. It's not as if Azusa and I think we should lash out against anything old fashioned or anything like that. If anything we're moved by it all, since we were both outsiders born in the city, without any connections to festivals or religious services or local customs and the like."

"You're moved?"

"Indeed so---or should I say awestruck? It's the feeling that comes with thinking 'I'm really and genuinely experiencing this.' That's the sort of thing we moved here seeking. Well, Azusa might have been a little put out. She said that even though it was the festival at last, if she wasn't a yuge-shuu she couldn't really see it out until the end, she says."

At Yuuki's answer, Hirosawa's voice rose in a quiet laugh.

"I see."

"She pouted 'why don't women become yuge-shuu' but, this, at least, would

have to be all men. This calls for physical strength more than anything."

"Yes, indeed." Hirosawa smiled. "It's sweltering hot and we're in these costumes. On top of that, we put on these masks and dance from one end of the village to the other."

"Tell me about it. ---Is there any significance to dressing in a monk's robes like this?"

"The word yuge-shuu comes from the yugyou shounin or wandering monk. That would be why we wear the monk's black robes, I'd imagine."

"A wandering monk?"

"That big straw effigy," Hirosawa said turning his eyes to the rising blaze of the bonfire. "Is called the Betto. It seems that's an effigy of the Betto---I don't know so much about it myself, I was told as much by the Junior Monk."

Hearing Junior Monk, Yuuki turned from the riverbed lit by the bonfire towards the mountains. The village of Sotoba was surrounded on three sides by mountain ridges, and on the slope was the main temple, the heir of which also had a side job as a writer. Yuuki had yet to obtain any of his writings but amongst the villagers, opinions on it seemed tinged with cynicism. They wouldn't say it too loudly, but somebody had called it 'kind of fastidious.' That they could say that with such a warm tone of voice may have been either because having a writer from the village at all was a point of pride or because of their respect and affection held towards the temple's son.

"In old farming villages, it was believed that insects and illnesses were because of evil spirits. During the Hougen Rebellion, there was a military leader called Saitou Sanemori."

"The Rebellion in the Heian period?"

"Yes. That Saitou Sanemori was also called Nagai Betto, you see. He was originally a military commander for the Minamoto Clan but later turned to the Heike clan. Sanemori went to the west to suppress Minamoto's General Yoshinaka and was defeated in the Battle of Shinohara in Kaga, they say because he stumbled over a rice plant stump. The legend that he bore a grudge and became a horde of insects that devoured rice plants spread through Japan,

so it seems to have become a custom to offer memorial services to Sanemori's spirit during the mushiokuri."

"Heh? So the Betto--that's Saitou Betto?"

"It's written in an old document that the ghost of Sanemori appeared in the village of Shinowara in Kaga before a wandering monk of the Ji-sect who performed his mourning ceremonies. There's the Noh play 'Sanemori' that's written about this topic as well. The legend must have been passed around in those days. That's why the Betto's attendants are wandering monks, yugyou shounin, but we say it yuge-shuu, according to the Junior Monk, anyway."

"But still, why Oni masks?"

"Ah, that," Hirosawa laughed. "In Sotoba we have an Oni called The Risen."

"The Risen?"

"Yes. We bury here, yes? So we have folk tales about the dead rising from their graves and coming down to haunt the village. We call them Oni. It doesn't make sense for the wanderers who mourned the Betto to be Oni but there are his attendants who wear not only the priest's robes, but Oni masks. They pray to him and then cast him away. That's the mushiokuri."

"Pray and cast him away----" Yuuki looked to the fire. "This is to say, we burn him."

The yuge-shuu carried the Betto. While the Betto itself was only made of straw, it was still rather heavy. It was paraded through the plowed lands and the mountain forests of the village. He had heard that the impurities of the surroundings would flow into it. The others were there to shoulder the weight of Sotoba as they uppoed. Uppo was the footwork performed by the yuge-shuu as they danced and paraded through every nook and cranny of the village purifying it further with each step. Carrying the child sized planks of the sotoba from one hokora to the next while uppoing was truly heavy labor.

"Do we use sotoba because this place is called Sotoba?"

He had heard that the village's name of Sotoba came from the sotoba grave. Hirosawa gave a quiet nod in answer to Yuuki's question.

"The village came to be for the purpose of raising firs and making them into sotoba."

In the past week those big sotoba were planted at the hokora scattered here and there. The people purchased the paper dolls from the shrine and wrote names on them, praying at their household shrines, passing their sins and filth onto them and cramming them onto the sotoba, offering piles of sake and food in a memorial service. The wanderers lapped the village gathering up those offerings. To be perfectly honest, it didn't sit well with him, the sotoba with the paper dolls jammed onto them. Or at least, the first time he had set eyes on the sight, he thought that he'd seen something he wasn't supposed to have seen.

"It must seem in bad taste if you're not used to it."

Yuuki gave a bitter smile, as Hirosawa spoke as if reading his mind.

"I was surprised at first. What's worse is that the Oni dressed like that were parading around with torch lights--it was more like a black magic ritual or a curse than a festival."

"A curse and a prayer are the same thing in the end. They're both supernatural. The mushiokuri could also technically be called contact with the dead. We pray the spirits away so as not to be cursed by them. The relation between man and the gods is colder than one would expect."

"Aboriginal religious festivals might have been just like this."

Hirosawa nodded. At some point, Mutou, beer can gripped in hand, had nodded off.

"Since we worship and cast it away, we can't wear the masks on the return trip. The Oni were chased out of the village. In the past, it seems they used to even bathe in the river and change clothes. But that could be dangerous when liquor's involved, so that tradition died out."

"I see. ---Then it's changed, hasn't it."

Thinking he heard disappointment in his words, Hirosawa made an apologetic expression.

"Originally the mushiokuri was meant to take place in the hottest days of the

summer, but now it's set on the night of a Saturday right around there. If we didn't, then working men wouldn't be able to take part. Without those kinds of changes, it wouldn't take place at all anymore."

"Oh, no, I only meant that while it's conforming to the status quo, it's still carrying on. It couldn't be called a real and live festival if it was just a matter of preserving an old tradition because it's old, would it?" Yuuki quickly supplemented, earning a smile from Hirosawa.

"I don't know about all that. --Well, if you compare us to the surrounding villages, we would probably have more remnants. Sotoba is a bit unique. Even amongst the other villages around here, we're a singularity."

"Is that so?"

"It was a village opened by lumberjacks who came from other places, so much it's called the 'other' or 'outside' Soto-, 'place' -ba. In truth, it wasn't really even consolidated enough to call a village, but the people of Sotoba said 'village' and people from outside said 'village'. Maybe there's some understanding that we mustn't become too much of a mixed bunch. People rarely come and they don't leave. That's what sort of place it is, this place."

"Then, I'm an oddity in an oddity," Yuuki said as Hirosawa laughed.

"What? Now that you've experience being a yuge-shuu, you're one of the village. It's going to be trouble you know, there are things that need to be done, you'll be assigned your role so to speak, and the leading and supporting actors have to have a hand in the physical labor."

"The yuge-shuu don't change?"

"Since you had participated this year, you'll likely be invited next year too. It isn't something you absolutely have to do but, who's going to participate is more or less decided. From the gong and taiko drums to the uppo, there's a way things are done."

"I see."

Yuuki forced a smile. As a man going on forty, practicing dancing was embarrassing, if he did say so himself.

"It goes Kami-Naka-Monzen, Shimo-Soto-Mizuguchi."

"What does that mean?"

"The village of Sotoba is made up of six subdivisions. Kami-Sotoba or Upper Sotoba, Naka-Sotoba or Mid-Sotoba, Monzen or Gatefront, Shimo-Sotoba or Lower Sotoba, Sotoba, and Mizuguchi or Waterspout. There's actually one more, a settlement set off a bit in the mountains called Yamairi or Mountain Entrance."

"I heard there weren't many left there, but...?"

"Indeed. There are only two houses left. Well, there's an upper and lower part of Yamairi itself that are assigned works. The organization of shrine members is called the Miyaza or Shrine Parish Guild but, if duties aren't assigned by the Miyaza, duties flow from the top down. That was the case, though things have changed. Lately houses have sprung up along the highway and the lower part's become bigger but in the past, it was nothing but rice fields. --The lower part is in charge of the Chinese New Year and the Shinkousai festival done right before the mushiokuri. That's quite heavy labor itself but, since we're in charge of the New Year's toshigamisai and the mushiokuri, we just watch those."

"Heh?"

"Even a village as small as this is wider than you'd expect. It's not just the religious rituals, all village events are handled top-bottom. The smaller events are handled by individual territories. Congratulatory or consolatory events are done on a smaller scale, you see. With the village subdivided as it is, your role is more or less decided, no matter what. At that event, he will be the one with the bell, at that event, he will be the palanquin bearer, and so on and so forth."

"I see. Then, to prepare for next year's mushiokuri, I'll have to build up a little endurance," Yuuki laughed, Hirosawa's own light laugh joining in.

"Where is your house, Hirosawa-san?"

"The same as you, Yuuki-san. Naka-Sotoba."

"Is that right. --Then be sure to stop by sometime."

"Likewise," said Hirosawa with a smile as Mutou raised his head. It seemed he woke up from his doze.

".....A car."

Yuuki and Hirosawa both took a look at Mutou's face, then up at the bank.

From the village entrance, that is to say the south, they could see headlights.

"Hahaa, wrong road, I bet," said Mutou, his enunciation hazy. He may have been right. The car lingered there as if bewildered, and slowly, bit by bit started to turn back.

Mutou squinted, expectant, and Hirosawa knitted his brows. Maybe Yuuki himself was making a similar expression. ----That was a cargo truck they saw. The back container was rather large. The car behind it was in the truck's shadow and couldn't be well seen.

The yuge-shuu surrounding the bonfire were all surprised, turning their backs to the flame to see the truck depart.

"Are they moving...? At this hour." Mutou's voice was half surprised, half doubtful. Yuuki nodded for the time being, for some reason turning to look at the backdrop. Against the sky with stars dotted like grains of sand, the looming mounds of the mountain range were simple blackness. The village was wedged between that blackness, where the upper mountain streams converged. As if trapped in by the merging mountain ranges, an especially large mountain range rose in the depths. Immediately to the left of that northern mountain, in the northwest of the village, the northern and western mountains convened. Yuuki knew as well as anyone in the village that there was a single residence there, one awaiting its master.

Since the truck turned back, it was probably unrelated to that house. ---But.

Maybe they were thinking the same thing; as soon as he thought to look, he realized that not only Mutou and Hirosawa but the yuge-shuu surrounding the bonfire were all doing the same, looking up to the northwest mountain.

Part 3

The air was a diluted indigo, the green of the firs on the mountain surface coming out of their pitch blackness. The silence, wrapped in morning dew, gave birth to the cries of mountain doves. Seishin exited the head priest's quarters with a broom in hand, onto the temple grounds awash in blue light, in white light. The sky couldn't be seen through the haze of morning dew. Looking as if it were etched with diluted ink, the stone pathway spread out, the temple gate that rose beyond it a blot of deep black.

The turtledoves murmured, but those murmurings seemed unusually well enunciated, sharp in the ear as Seishin crossed the temple grounds, the very picture of tranquility, towards the temple gate. The fulcrum of the gate he rested the broom against was also damp. He extracted the bolt that was profoundly moist and, just as he was opening the gates from the inside, the entrance beside the gate front opened. The one who entered the side door, back bent, going 'Oh ho?' as his eyes narrowed as if spying something amusing was Mitsuo.

"Good morning."

Just as Mitsuo bowed his completely receded hairline in greeting, Seishin gave his own greeting at that same moment. Their voices overlapped. Mitsuo's laughed out loud, perhaps finding that funny as well.

Tadokoro Mitsuo did odd jobs around the temple. He wasn't a

monk, so he didn't chant sutras, but he took on all sorts of various tasks. Every day, he'd come from his home at the base of the mountain and pass the whole day breaking down whatever jobs needed to be done. Along with his mother who helped out in the office, the family was a part of the temple, and Seishin couldn't recall a single day to his memory that Mitsuo hadn't been seen here.

"It seems today will be hot again," said Mitsuo, taking hold of one of the gate doors. That was when he tilted his head, taking a look at Seishin's face. "Junior Monk, your eyes are red. Let me guess, staying up late again?"

Having it pointed out by Mitsuo, Seishin gave an ashamed nod.

His father had a cerebral hemorrhage last year, and since then Seishin had taken over the management of the temple but, due to his side job, he kept many late nights. Morning at the temple was around five o'clock so, there were plenty of times when he'd go without sleep altogether.

"Will you be all right? Aren't there quite a few memorial services today?"

From the Saturday of the Mushiokuri or rather from to the early hours of its Sunday morning, maybe even from the preceding Shinkousai to please the gods, the village was focused on summer Shinto rituals. During that time, everyone put off the Buddhist memorial services while the Bon festival to see off the dead quickly approached. The half month between the mushiokuri and the Bon Feast of Lanterns would always be busy with arrangements for memorial services. Today was heavily booked as well. There were two

monks taking charge of services, and during busy times the head monk from the neighboring temple would come so in theory there were substitutes, but the acting head monk of the temple couldn't very well take a shameless daytime nap.

"If you're so inclined, how about asking Tsurumi-san to oversee the services and getting a bit of sleep?"

Tsurumi was a monk who came in from the village. Seishin quickly shook his head.

"No, I'm all right."

"It's going to be a busy season, so we need you to take care of yourself. Please, rest. I will make arrangements with Tsurumi-san."

"I really am fine."

"If you're sure," murmured Mitsuo as he took the bamboo broom in hand, a figure ascending the front temple steps visible through the morning haze. It was Chiyo of the general store at the base of the steps. The old woman carried a broom in place of a cane, sweeping step by step as she climbed the stairway, turning towards Seishin and Mitsuo with a silent and formal bow.

"Good morning."

"You're early as always."

When Seishin and Mitsuo called out, Chiyo gave another wordless bow.

About how old was she now, that old woman of few words and scant expressions? Seishin had seen her every morning since he was a child but he had had so few conversations with her, they could probably even be counted by memory. This was her burden to bear, a free service provided; the time she had spoken of it with

embarrassment still left a profound impression on him. She had promised to the Buddha that if her husband returned safely from the war, she would clean. That husband had passed on long ago but Chiyo herself was still healthy and every morning came in said good health, sweeping the steps that lead to the front gate, attending the morning services, then returning home.

Faith was alive in the village. The elderly in the

neighborhood would come to every morning service, many handling the odd jobs around the temple. It certainly had the appearance of a temple in a village where the grand majority of the villagers were parishioners who supported the temple, being a very large variety of temple. Even with three monks, Mitsuo and his mother Katsue, Seishin and his mother Miwako, there weren't enough people to manage it. To put it simply, the temple could not function without the families that supported it.

With another light nod at Chiyo who silently began sweeping,

Seishin took up his own broom again.

The temple was at the northernmost point of the village, on a

fir covered southern facing slope of a northern mountain. He could take in the spread of the village through the morning haze at a glance from the mountain gate.

Sotoba was packed into a triangle between complicated mountain ridges.

The village spread around the mountain stream is contained in a triangle like the tip of a harpoon by a forest of firs.

Seishin had used such a simile to describe Sotoba's terrain.

The tip of the harpoon was like an arrow drawn on the map denoting north. The northern mountain was situated at the tip of that, and the temple looked down over the village from that spot. The ridges that spread off of the northern mountain formed the western bank of the village, which made a right angled turn capping the south. At the shaft of the arrow was the eastern spur, running parallel to the flow of the mountain stream. The temple was at the summit of the triangle, facing the southern ridges with the highway beyond them, the expressway piercing through the south. That was the southern boundary of the village.

From where Seishin was at, at the temple gate, he could survey it all at a glance. Wedged between spurs of mountains, it spread out like a paper fan with the temple as a base, covered in fields and houses. Some houses were spread out, some were crammed together into communities, all gradually descending to and opening out to the southern mountain spurs. Looking out over it, it was as if the whole lot could be held in the palm of his hand.

Seishin narrowed his eyes as he heard a sound like a scream emitting from the scooter that scaled the mountain. Riding up the private pathway, coming from the side of belfry side of the temple towards the temple grounds was the temple monk Tsurumi. Tsurumi, in his black robes with his helmet still on, gave Seishin a nod and continued towards the grounds. Seishin returned his greeting and lowered his eyes to the stone path. Broom gripped in hand, he devoted himself to sweeping.

When the schedule was busy, after the morning services, Sumi would come from the neighboring temple and Mitsuo's mother Katsue would come to help in the office. Just before noon, the temple monk Ikebe returned to the temple from his off season summer vacation.

The busy day passed, Seishin headed to the meditation dojo, an enclosure within the priest's family quarters. He met his mother just at the entrance, bringing a tray with tea cups and tea cakes. Behind Miwako was Mitsuo, a large kettle in hand. In the dojo, past the open sliding door, were the mere fifteen supporters of the temple taking a break.

"Thank you very much for today."

Seishin entered the dojo and nodded his head as Miwako knelt to say their thanks.

"You are truly appreciated. Everyone, please enjoy a short rest."

As Miwako spoke, the people surrounding the low table bowed their heads. They interrupted their pleasant chat to say thank you, still wiping their necks with towels, others still wearing their aprons.

Many performed their memorial services in their own homes but there were parishioners who had moved far away, or who had other circumstances that lead to them using the temple. At times like these, in a village with no takeout or delivery services, the duty of preparing meals between parishioners and priests fell to the temple. When it came to doing the yard work for the grounds and the building maintenance, the temple was chronically short handed. When

there were events or functions, a meeting could be had beforehand with all of the helpers to pass on duties but they couldn't do that for daily memorial services. The temple was sustained in ordinary times by unspoken attentiveness.

"The Junior Monk must be worn as well. It is hard work after the mushiokuri, isn't it!" said Yasumori Setsuko with a smile. "And thank you to you as well, Madame." she said nodding towards Miwako.

"We truly manage because of the help like this that you all provide."

"I do try not to get in the way," Setsuko said with a bright laugh. Setsuko was member of the parishioner's committee Yasumori Tokujiro's second wife. She wasn't yet at the age at which one commonly concentrated so heavily on faith but she organized the women parishioners and regularly looked after the temple. Today was another day spent organizing the female laborers towards overseeing the temple kitchen work for the meals shared between the priests and the mourners, from setting the placements to the clean up afterwards.

"It's going to be like this until Obon, isn't it? Isn't tomorrow's schedule busy with the Buddhist memorial services too?"

"That it is," Miwako answered Setsuko with a smile.

"Then, I wonder if I might count on everyone's help again tomorrow?"

In response to Setsuko's words, about nine women gave a

nod.

The elderly, in a fashion befitting the elderly, called out to Mitsuo as he went about filling their tea cups.

"Mitsuo-san, we're sure you'll be busy tomorrow, yourself."

"The cemetery's walkway is getting pretty overgrown, I think I'll be mowing," Mitsuo said with a smile floating to his face.

"Yes, indeed. Obon is close; I was thinking the cemetery needed to be mowed. We should at least make sure the walkways are kept up, yes?"

The village buried their dead, and while they didn't necessarily construct the tombs themselves, there were those within the parish who didn't have a place to bury their dead, or those who had other circumstances which lead to cremation who would still want a grave site built. For just such circumstances, the temple had a graveyard on its western slopes but while it was thought to be the community's duty to provide its upkeep in truth it was Mitsuo alone who did it, and only in his spare time.

"Then, guess tomorrow I could mow."

"Well, if you do it bit by bit, you ought to have it done by Bon."

Light laughter broke out. Setsuko bowed her head to the laughing people.

Miwako herself had come from a nearby temple, succeeding this house by arranged marriage. Being a woman of temples herself, she wasn't unfamiliar with the strain of managing a temple home. But it was a temple whose attendants only totaled around two hundred, so

it wasn't even in the same league as her parent's temple, where it was barely full time work. When she'd heard it was large despite being a countryside temple, she was prepared but when she had stepped into the reality of it, it had surpassed her imagination.

There was quite an age difference between herself and her husband, who had a late marriage, so Miwako had only borne one child. They were but a family of three. The cornerstone of the temple labor should be those of temple family, but that temple family itself was minimal. While the temples patrons were many, it was the country, so the alms and offerings didn't amount to much, thus there was a limit to how much help they could hire. If it weren't for the good will of the people willing to lend a hand and a smile, the temple would not be. She held a visceral gratitude.

"Come to think of it," said the old man Takemura Gohei to

nobody in particular. "Yesterday, no, I guess it's today, huh? Did you hear about the truck that came through?"

"A truck?" repeated a few others.

"A moving truck. Old man Matsuo came by and mentioned it when cutting the grass."

"Oh my, for the Kanemasa house?" Setsuko said, surprised.

Where the northern mountain of the temple and the western mountain met was a Takemura family mansion called Kanemasa. It was demolished and afterwards a strange house was built. It was finished during the rainy season and yet its inhabitants had yet to move in.

"I don't know, it's just. They said the yuge-shuu saw the

truck. The truck came in as they were burning the Betto, and then

turned back."

"Ah, their eldest son was a yuge-shuu. --But, isn't the Betto
burned in the dead of the night?"

"That it is."

Seishin faintly knitted his brows. Before the break of dawn,
he had seen the lights of a car coming into the village from his
window. He had thought at the time that it was not a suitable time
for such a thing.

"People don't normally move in in the middle of the night, do
they?"

"Are you sure they didn't take the wrong road?" Mitsuo
interjected, though Setsuko did not seem satisfied with his
explanation.

"Could one make such a mistake, I wonder?"

Seishin tilted his head slightly. Where the village road
along the stream came to the highway there was indeed a three way
fork but surely nobody would mistake the village road for the
highway.

Old man Gohei nodded, too.

"But then, they didn't move in after all, so we can only
assume it was a mistake. But, there were two cars behind it, so
it's a pretty strange story either way," said Setsuko, earning a
nod from Mitsuo.

"They haven't moved in, have they, now that you mention. Even
though that building's been finished a while now. --What were those
people called again?"

"Nobody knows! There's no nameplate. I mean, even the ones
who built the house were from an outside company, so they must not

have any connection to Sotoba at all. So, nobody knows anything about them. Though, I did hear that they were from Tokyo or somewhere around there."

Setsuko's household was often called The Contractors, working in construction. In the village most construction was taken up by the Yasumori contractors but, come to think of it, the Yasumoris had nothing to do with that home, Seishin recalled.

Setsuko looked towards Seishin, giving a troubled smile. "My, but after they've moved all this way, it would be nice if they were good people."

After looking over the people who nodded their assent,

Seishin turned his eyes towards the dojo window. The summer sun shone in. Through the southwesterly window was the graveyard spread over the temple's western slope, overlooking the storage house for the sawmill at the foot of that slope. At the side of the sawmill's storehouse was a concrete building that served as the village's one and only hospital, the Ozaki Clinic, and on the mountain slope beyond that was the Kanemasa mansion. Between here and there were the fir trees blocking off that building from sight. Above the tree tops he could just barely see a black slate roof and part of the gables peeking up.

The Takemura house popularly called Kanemasa was formerly the estate of the village headman, built there in order to look down on the village as the founding family they were. The headman took the opportunity to transfer into the neighboring town of Mizobe's administration, moving into the town's territory itself but it wasn't as if all ties to Sotoba were cut. Two generations of the

family had inherited the duties of the town headsman, and they held considerable influence in the parliament; furthermore, with their strong ties to Sotoba, Kanemasa even now held considerable weight as Sotoba's mouthpiece, carrying on as leader of the village. That is, until that Kanemasa family head passed on last year in July, with the Kanemasa mansion being demolished in August. It seemed the late predecessor sold the land before he died. Afterwards an odd house was built.

There was nobody who knew what kind of people its masters were. Kanemasa was still considered a supporting family of the temple so Seishin had known the heir for some time, but even that heir said he didn't know why the land was sold. It seemed the predecessor had arbitrarily taken it on himself to make the sale in secret. As for why he would do such a thing, nobody could make sense of it. Releasing the estates was tantamount to severing ties with Sotoba. For the Kanemasas who had set up a stronghold in Sotoba, it was too senseless, and even the heir was at his wits end try to make sense of it.

Why did the new owners move out into the country side was one question, another was what kind of people were they and under what circumstances did they purchase the plot of land, and another still was what was the Kanemasa predecessor thinking when selling the land off, the house and the territory around it. There were so many unanswered questions.

Then there was the moving truck that came in the deep of night. In its own way, it was fitting for that house. But, whoever

was going to move in, they wouldn't have been Kanemasas. Seishin continued to gaze up at the mountain. Probably---no, certainly.

Part 4

The nights, when the heat could dissipate, were short and the sun rose early to shine brightly over the mountainsides, warming them up. Kunihiro Ritsuko came down the steep slope at a quick pace. The northern part of the village was nothing but slopes from the northern mountain. A number of kids were behind Ritsuko, and with no mind for the slope, they would go up and down them, passing Ritsuko by.

"Miss! Good morning!"

Ritsuko returned a "Good morning!" to them. The kids made it to the top of the hill, crossing over the slope towards yet another slope that lead to the lumber mill. They were probably going to do radio exercises.

With a light smile Ritsuko passed the street corner to the white building ahead. The one with the Ozaki Hospital signboard was Ritsuko's workplace.

From the mountains that pressed in on the village, the breeze blew through like a lingering shade, carrying the smell of the fir trees with the voices of the cicadas. Their cries made the early summer morning somehow melancholy. Turning her eyes to the eastern mountains, the freshly risen sun's rays were strong, and she imagined it would be another hot day today.

Taking a shortcut across the parking lot, Ritsuko went around the back of the hospital. She came in through the staff entrance, straight towards the locker room.

"Good morning," she called out politely as she opened the door, though there was nobody in the locker room. No other nurses must have arrived yet, as the window blinds were left closed, the air in the room stagnant with the lingering laziness of the weekend.

The Ozaki Hospital did have "hospital" on the signboard but for all practical purposes, they didn't take in-patients. If it was for observation or examinations, a special case might be taken in for a night or two, but any patients who required a longer stay than that were all sent to the hospital in Mizobe. Thus if there was no night shift, there was no Sunday shift, and her fellow nurses would rotate shifts in order to have two days off per week. As the village's only hospital there were emergency cases that would be taken on a Sunday but the hospital director who had inherited the position was understanding and had staff on call in three week cycles, as it wasn't like they really needed to come in to work, and there was compensation for being on call. --All in all, she found it a bountiful place to work at.

She choose the job because she liked it after all, and it felt worth doing. It wasn't a bad place to work. And yet, on the morning after a day off, there was that listlessness, thinking 'here we go, another week.'

Throwing her bag into the locker, Ritsuko took out her freshly selected white coat. She changed into her white uniform,

tied her hair up and put on her white nurse's cap. Funny how with just those preparations, it felt as if her posture improved.

It was going from her personal self to herself as a nurse.

There was a strange divide between the two. The listlessness after a day off might have just been annoyance at crossing that distance between the two selves that grew the longer a break was.

She checked herself out in the mirror and gave herself an:

"All right!" She raised the blinds and opened the window, a cool breeze and the voices of the cicadas blowing in. And, of course, the lively voices of children.

Behind the hospital stretched a narrow rice field and the

Maruyasu lumberyard. That was the spot decided on for the neighborhood's radio exercises. The cheerful shouts of the kids gathered there echoed through the mountains near the lumberyard, flowing more loudly into the room than even the voices of the cicadas.

The nearby mountains were bountifully green. High on the

mountain to the right, the main temple building could be seen.

Shone on directly by the sun's rays, the large roof glistened like dull silver. From the temple grounds to the sawmill, the slope was sparse with trees that jutted out like teeth. That was the temple's graveyard. As Sotoba didn't really use tombstones, you wouldn't know it was one just by looking.

There the mountains had horseshoe hollow, holding

who-knew-how-many lumberyards. Clean cut wavelets of the planted

fir trees treetops basked in the morning sun. The mountains to the left were green with firs, too. From above that a pointed black roof top peeked out.

Ritsuko ended up looking up looking up at that house--that mansion.

Until recently, that was the Kanemasa mansion. It was a stately mansion indeed, with its old stone walls, its countless ridged roofs, and garden trees. And furthermore, the masters had long ago--before Ritsuko had even come capable of awareness---changed residencies, so the mansion was often unmanned, and while there was at least upkeep, it wasn't what you would call stellar, so amongst the children it was known as "The Kanemasa Haunted Mansion."

Ritsuko, during a middle school under the guise of some test of courage game, had snuck into the garden. She remembered expecting it to be unmanned only for an old man she supposed was the property manager to find her and scold her.

That haunted mansion was torn down last year. Afterwards a strange house was erected. It was called strange but it wasn't exactly the building itself that was strange. Yes, if it weren't in Sotoba, if it was a holiday home, that is, in some small village in another country, there wouldn't have been anything out of place about it. It was small, but it was like something you'd see in a movie--an occidental house.

That building, when compared to the village that was its backdrop, clearly stood out. Another thing that made it weird was its bearings. That house seemed to think it was there for a hundred

years or more. It had an old stone wall, and the chimneys and windows looked as if they'd weathered the winds and the rains. It appeared they dismantled and rebuilt an older building.

The villagers were bewildered as to why someone would do that. They demolished an old house and built a new one, regardless of whether it blended in well with its scenery, overlooking a small village unlike any other that one could find anywhere else, giving off a feeling of greater age and history than any other home in the village. No matter how it seemed to be aged into place, there was an unshakably out of place feel to it.

(It really is a strange house...)

As she murmured that in her thoughts, the locker room door opened.

"Oh my, it's Ricchan!"

It was Nurse Nagata Kiyomi.

"Good morning."

"It sure is early," said Kiyomi with a smile, opening her locker. "What's wrong? You look pensive."

Ritsuko shook her head. "Just thinking that the weather is nice. It looks like it's going to be hot."

"You said it," said Kiyomi with both a sigh and a smile, stripping off her clothes candidly. Ritsuko hurried and stretched a hand to lower the blinds.

"Oh, it's fine. We'll get a breeze if the blinds are open. It might be different for a girl like Ricchan, but there's not going to be anyone peeking in to see this old girl in her underwear."

"Wouldn't you say lady instead of old girl? About a woman at forty."

Kiyomi laughed as she put on her white coat.

"That's old fashioned. ---I've long passed forty. The only one who'd call me young and be happy to come see me would be the dead from the temple's yard."

Ritsuko looked at the graveyard on the slope with a laugh.

"What's this, age talk?" said Hashiguchi Yasuyo, coming into the locker room.

"Good morning."

"Morning. --Well dear me. Leaving the blinds wide open like that!"

"Like I was saying," laughed Kiyomi. "I'm at the age where it wouldn't even be bad to be peeked at."

"What are you saying! You, you're still ten years younger than me!"

"Maybe if I was ten kilos lighter I'd hide."

"Some people hide for shame, but there's a matter of modesty, you know. Though if I were as young as Ricchan, I might flaunt a little."

"Matter of modesty, huh?"

"If a woman doesn't have that, it's all over for her! ---Even you and me aren't something to scoff at, for a couple of old sea lions."

Toshio stepped out of the bathroom first thing in the morning with a cigarette already in his mouth and headed to the dining room. The bright light came pouring in through the large southern window. There were two people's shares of breakfast set on the

table with a newspaper in Toshio's seat. He looked at the sight and thought 'I see, Kyouko's gone back to Mizobe.'

Ozaki Toshio was thirty two and the director of Sotoba's only hospital, the Ozaki Hospital. That is to say, Toshio was the only doctor in town. Three years ago, his father died of pancreatic cancer, and so he quit his job at the university hospital to return. His wife Kyouko was thirty and they had no children. Unable to stand life in the mountain village, Kyouko stayed in her apartment near an antique shop she kept in the more urban town of Mizobe. She came back to Sotoba two or three times a month.

Toshio wasn't sure whether it was more appropriate to say she didn't come by more often than that or that she came by that frequently. That she hated life there and left may have meant that they had a cold marriage but all that aside she did come back on her own so that may have meant they had a good relationship.

"Good morning."

As he looked out the window, his mother Takae carried in miso soup. He gave a halfhearted response. Looking at the weather forecast, it would be a clear day and the probability of rain was 0 percent. The daytime temperature was to be hotter than usual for this time of year, with temperatures to surpass 36 degrees Celsius. It'd been that way this year since spring. There hadn't been much

rain and it was unusually hot. In the Tokai region, there was a wide scale drought and severe damages caused by the intense heat.

Takae sat facing the table, taking in Toshio's T-shirt and jeans clad form with a critical eye. At the elegant and extravagant evergreen table were six chairs of elaborate and refined craftsmanship, the most ornate of which was empty. It was once his father's seat, and according to Takae, that was the seat of the head of the family, and Toshio was still lacking in the dignity to so much as sit at that seat. Toshio didn't really care where he sat. He would be fine sitting in the lowest seat but his mother didn't understand that. It seemed she meant withholding the family head's chair to be a punishment.

With a 'good grief' breath, he kept his eyes outside. Through the living room window overlooking the spacious backyard one could take in the western mountains at a glance. The mountain side was a summer suited green and poking out through one section of that was a slate black roof. The structure stuck out from above the gables. It was a curious, triangular roof, like a picture a small child would draw. It wasn't a house suited for Sotoba, but if it were only surrounded by the fir trees and if that was all that were around it, it could suit itself there in its own way. If it were covered in snow in the winter, it may have been an interesting sight.

(It's a weird house...)

As he murmured that in his thoughts, Toshio caught sight of Takae, who let out a low voice. "Do you have the time to be so leisurely?"

Receiving only a halfhearted answer to that as well, Takae looked out the window for only a moment, herself. "They haven't moved in, have they? I wonder, have they no intent to live here at all?"

"It's probably not a holiday home. Not a house built up like that."

"How garish."

Toshio gave a thin smirk at the clear thorns present in Takae's words. To begin with Takae's relationship with Kanemasa was not a good one. She did not take well to being looked down upon by them. As the Kanemasas had moved out, at last the only ones looking down on the Ozaki family were those at the temple, and now those whose faces she had never even seen had come to look down on her. For Toshio, it was something he couldn't understand being so upset over but so long as he couldn't understand that, he would never be allowed to sit at the seat for the head of the family.

"Everyone's got their circumstances. --Done with breakfast."

Mutou entered the hospital grounds and noted that the front door was already opened. Through the glass pane, he confirmed that several patients had arrived in the waiting room. Part timer Sekiguchi Miki was sweeping. With a greeting to him, Mutou turned towards the side door. As he stepped in the side door, he saw another part timer Takano Fujou was beside the spicket washing the mop. They exchanged greetings and he headed into the locker room for his white coat. He drew out the changing wall, his legs dragging, then hurried to the reception desk where Towada was scrubbing the counter.

"G'Morning."

"Good morning." Towada gave a youthful smile and wave.

"I'm already finished here, so you're welcome to go to the break room first, Mutou-san. I will handle things here!"

"Sorry for the trouble."

Towada humbly dismissed that it was no trouble and turned to greet the patients. Most of them had been getting treatment here for a while, so there were many familiar faces.

Just as he was going to take Towada up on his offer and head to the break room, the director stepped into the waiting room from his own house. Dressed in only jeans and a T-shirt.

"Yo, morning," Toshio said to nobody in particular, sliding his arm through his white coat as he surveyed the waiting room.

"Oi, oi. There's already this many here? You old folks and your

early rising."

One old woman replied to his idle comment. "Isn't it more that the young doctor is slow to rise? It's late, you know."

"Like that's the problem. It's because I have to meet with you all that business hours have been pushed up earlier and earlier. Hope you're all at least eating breakfast before you come in."

"I always do."

"That's good. You don't have many years left you know, so you have to eat as much good food as you can so there's no regrets."

Thin laughter filled the waiting room. Mutou and Towada exchanged forced smiles. The director, Ozaki Toshio, was like this in anything and everything he did.

"There you go again with those thoughtless, cruel words..."

Sighed Mutou quietly as he followed after Toshio into the break room.

"It's the gods' honest truth. ---What's up? You're dragging your feet."

"I'm just sore. It's from the mushiokuri."

"That right? Mutou-san was a yuge-shuu?"

"Yes, I was, but that aside..." Mutou gave Toshio a withering glare. "Since you don't watch your mouth, I have to hear that the young doctor of the Ozaki Hospital is a no-good doctor, you realize."

"Is there any doubt I am a no-good doctor? If I was serious about being a doctor, do you think I'd come back to the country like this? What I left behind was a modern ivory tower."

'Good grief,' thought Mutou as he forced a smile. The former Doctor Ozaki had been an exceedingly haughty man, and there were those, particularly the elderly, who came to the hospital longing for the gravitas of his predecessor, saying that his son was an impudent brat but as for Mutou himself, he preferred the son to the father. He was verbally abusive, using it to intentionally provoke others around him, imprudent and light lipped. Wearing his white coat over jeans and a T-shirt, he didn't command so much as an ounce of majesty as a doctor but he didn't begrudge after-hours medical examinations and if he was called, then regardless of the hour he would grab his bag and go off on a house call without a second thought. Last year he'd taken out a significant loan to expand and remodel one part of the hospital and bring in a CT scanner. The destruction of the spacious director's office beloved by generations, indeed a splendid room, and the adjoining reception

room that both faced outwards to an extravagant garden, for the sake of at CR scanner, spoke volumes about Toshio's temperament.

Toshio opened the break room door. Inside, Towada saw that all staff members were already assembled. There were four nurses. First was the eldest, Hashiguchi Yasuyo, with Nagata Kiyomi and Kunihiro Ritsuko completing the list of those from within town, followed by the commuter, Shiomi Yuki. There was another worker who commuted, Isaki Satoko, but she wasn't there today. Towada supposed that since she wasn't here, it must have been her day off. There was the X-ray technician Shimoyama, the office workers Mutou and Towada, as well as the part timers in charge of cleaning and general duties, Miki and Fujou, and that was all the staff there were to take care of each and every patient in Sotoba.

"Good morning."

Seeing Toshio and Mutou, Kiyomi stood. In response Toshio indicated for her to get him a coffee and sat himself down at one of the chairs surrounding the wide table. Mutou pulled out a neighboring seat when his movements caught Kiyomi's eye as she was about to leave the room.

"Mutou-san, what happened? To your leg."

"I was just now telling the doctor how they're

sore."

"Oh, Mutou-san was a yuge-shuu? Somebody doesn't get enough exercise, does he!"

"A little exercise wouldn't have warded this off."

Toshio snickered. "The festivities start off with bunch of guys jumping all over the place like mountain tengu, after all."

"Exactly."

With a grimace he finally took a seat. He had tended to it all day yesterday, but it still hurt. It seemed like he was going to be groaning every time he stood or sat down for a while still.

At the window side table, the nurses dutifully prepared the gauze. Shimoyama opened a manual filled with sticky notes. Before the hospital opened staff was supposed to assemble for a morning meeting but it was really only a chance for staff to relay anything that needed to be known while everyone was assembled in the brief lull before medical examinations began, and nothing more.

The sun's rays and a pleasantly cool breeze came in through

the wide open window. For now they could get by comfortably enough without the air conditioner but this summer was hot. As the sun rose, the temperatures were sure to rise rapidly as always.

"The weather's so good it's annoying." Toshio looked out the window, lighting a cigarette. Toshio was a member of the heavy smoker class, an archetypal example of a doctor not practicing what they preach, neglecting their own health.

"It really is!" Yasuyo stopped to look out the window.

Already sweat was forming on the rounded tip of her nose. "Day after day, I can't take this heat! When you put on weight, heat becomes even hotter."

"Of course summer's gonna be hot. But still, this summer is *hot*. This weather's going to clear the old folks right on out of here."

Mutou scowled at Toshio. "I'm begging you, please do not say that kind of imprudent thing in public."

"---If I lose that many clients, at least Seishin will be raking it in."

Mutou let out a sigh; there was nothing that could be done about him. The heir of the mountain temple, Muroi Seishin had been a classmate of Toshio's.

"...Come to think of it, someone from the Yajima National Health Institute said that he had seen the doctor talking to a monk and found it strange."

As Yasuyo said that, Toshio gave a low chuckle.

"He could smell the conspiracy, I bet. When me and Seishin get together, you never know what we might be plotting."

"Please don't say that. When you say it, it doesn't sound enough like a joke."

While the fir trees isolated the mountainside and the houses in a sense, they were at the top of the map near the Maruyasu sawmill's lumber yard and the doctor and the monk had been friends since they were children. It was common knowledge amongst the villagers but it might have looked like an unusual combination to someone who didn't know.

"That's right, hey, back to the mushiokuri," said Mutou as he rubbed at his leg. "Something weird happened."

"Something weird?"

"Yes. While we were burning the Betto, a moving van came by."

"Oi, oi. Isn't that in the dead of night?"

"Right, in the dead of night. There was a truck and two cars following it."

'Hnn' breathed Toshio as he exhaled smoke, looking to the window. "Whatever the case, they seem to be pretty weird. The people living at Kanemasa."

"Don't you think so? If a moving truck comes in you'd normally think that they were finally going to move in to Kanemasa, wouldn't you? The house had been built last June, but the owners themselves still hadn't ever moved in! As a matter of fact, that truck only came in half way, then turned back around!"

"Eh?" It was Yasuyo who interrupted. "Are you sure it wasn't just a careless driver who took the wrong road?"

"That can't be," said Yuki. Yuki drove in to work from a neighboring town herself. "There's no road to mistake it for. The road's a different size! There aren't any side roads around there besides the one coming into Sotoba."

"So I'm saying, maybe they had the wrong main road and were changing course."

"If that was the case, isn't there the drive-in on the corner at the intersection? The parking lot is big enough that the truck could have easily turned around without having to come all the way into town to back up and change directions."

"Really?"

"In the first place, you wouldn't normally move in in the middle of the night, either."

"You might if you moved in from far away," Yasuyo said looking to Mutou. "What was on the license plate?"

"No idea. It wasn't close enough that you could see the license plate."

"In cases like that, wouldn't you set out to arrive during the day time? It's strange is what it is."

While Yuki was trying to push the story as strange, Yasuyo turned a frustrated eye to her.

"Then there was probably some unexpected delay that made them arrive late, I'm sure."

"But isn't that booooring?"

Mutou and the others laughed at her whining way of putting it.

"Good grief. That's all it comes down to for this girl."

"I want to be entertained, since I'm still young," said Yuki as she leaned towards Ritsuko, peering up into her eyes. "Since I don't have anybody to eat lunch with on Sunday in Mizobe, three

doors down from the town hall at the Italian restaurant."

Ritsuko's eyes widened with a start, her face quickly going red.

"Yuki-chan," Yasuyo laughed. "What a concrete topic you've turned to now!"

"It's a maiden's dream! He would wear a green polo shirt, and I would dress to match him in a mint green one piece!"

"Oh, Yuki-chan, you!"

Toshio laughed as Ritsuko gave Yuki a light push. "Yuki-chan still hasn't said who she was with, though."

"That's right, that's right!"

With a whine of 'No!' Ritsuko glared at Yuki as if angry, her face red.

Come to think of it, Ritsuko was twenty eight, wasn't she, getting to be about that age, thought Mutou. It wouldn't be strange at all for her to be getting married at that age, in fact by the village of Sotoba's standards she would be a late marriage. But it would hurt to have the good nurse quit. Even setting her quality aside, there would probably be a nurse shortage; he didn't think that they could find a replacement so easily for a country hospital.

"If you're getting married, make it to someone who'll let you continue nursing. If not, don't expect any wedding presents from me."

At Toshio's teasing, Ritsuko turned away, still bright red.

"It is not going to come to that!"

According to the Ozaki Hospital signboard, their specialty was internal medicine but by request they could look into anything. It was technically a hospital, so patients could be admitted but in all the rooms there were 19 beds, all of which had remained open ever since Toshio had returned. Even if they had the equipment, there wasn't enough staff to manage in-patient clients.

"I'd been planning to rely on Ricchan's little sister, though. Her working at a day care was a miscalculation."

Despite being teased by Toshio, Ritsuko wore an unfazed smile.

"Don't you think she choose that instead because she sees how much I suffer for work?"

"And so, we've got no choice but to count on Mutou-san's

daughter."

"Surely you jest," returned Mutou. Kids nowadays wouldn't want to work at the same place as their parents, and his eighteen year old daughter was still in high school.

"You're a cold guy. Then that leaves--" Just as Toshio was speaking, Kiyomi returned from the kitchen with a tray. "Ah ha, Nagata-san's got a daughter."

Mutou and Ritsuko laughed, leaving Kiyomi to look at them with bewilderment. "What is this? You've been badmouthing me, I see."

"Naw," Toshio laughed. "It's been unanimously decided that we will be having Nagata-san's daughter coming to work here as a nurse."

Kiyomi gave an exasperated huff. "My child is still in sixth grade. ---Here, your coffee."

Kiyomi sat a cup down in front of Toshio and Mutou.

"Excuse me, Doctor?" Towada opened the door and stuck his face in. "The old man from the Ebata family's fallen off of his bicycle."

"It starts."

Toshio stood. Yuki and Ritsuko briskly prepared the gauze.

"Is he coming in?"

"Someone from the house will be bringing him. He's cut his head and his face is covered in blood."

Toshio and Yasuyo half-hustled out, leaving the freshly brought coffee untouched. It was still ten minutes until office hours officially began.

Part 5

Their lunch finished, the two children flew outside. Maeda Motoko saw them off and then washed the bowls and cups they had been using before they'd left. The same children who had vowed when summer vacation had first started to bring their own dishes to the sink and wash them had begun abandoning their jobs one by one, as if becoming accustomed to the vacation from school and remembering how the wild and free time was meant to be used. They would probably, no, certainly, be leaving their dishes on top of the table and running out to play until after the Bon festival.

--That's just how children are.

Motoko bore a smile as she cleaned. Motoko herself had been made to promise their teacher that they would all clean up around the house together over the break but little by little things returned to this natural state as they approached the new semester.

Even if there were vacations from school, the adult world didn't have such vacations. Her husband was away at work at the JA, the Japan Agricultural Cooperative, and her in-laws had gone off into the mountains. In order to allow her step parents to use them if they returned, she straightened up the utensils and snack box. Setting the cloth over it, she set out of the house.

Motoko's home was in the southern tip of the village. The southern part of the village was nothing but farm fields. The village that opened up from the north like a spreading paper fan collided with the southern mountain ridges that closed it off. That southern spur's tip defined the boundaries of the unobstructed water planes. Those paddy fields were a plane of subdued green. It seemed that out beyond the village was a water shortage that was causing severe damages but for the time being that didn't seem to be in effect in the village. The foot paths between the fields were like a gutter, due to the spreading rice plants. The firs that covered the mountains were a deeper green than ever, shone on by the sun's bright rays that emphasized their hue, the color of summer itself.

A transformer was erected directly on the edge of the southern mountain spur. The power cables that stretched off of that from the mountain ridges out towards the other mountains formed a relay between the ridges, winding from the southern spurs to the westerly ones. The tower glistened like silver against the backdrop of the cloudless summer sky.

Motoko squinted her eyes and crossed the path in front of her house. The thin asphalt road was surrounded by an irregular dotting of houses, overall nothing to cast a sufficient shadow over it, making the surface of the road shimmer with a haze of hot air like heating burning metal. To escape that heat she stepped down from the road into the paths between the rice fields, where the tips of the rice plants tickled at her feet, walking between fields until coming out at the highway. The national highway that ran north from the south of the village meandered greatly between two mountain ridges on the south and the east. Walking along that curve, soon up ahead a short bridge appeared. On the guardrail of the bridge was engraved "Sotoba Bridge" but there probably weren't many who would remember that name. The name didn't mean anything to those outside the village, and to the villagers it was known as the "highway bridge." ---There were plenty of accidents near that "highway bridge"

The plain between the two ridges was broad and allowed for a clear view of the curve. That must have invited negligence on the part of drivers, leading them to speed up in excess, which was bound to lead to an accident. Especially in the south--cars coming from Mizobe heading north, due to the clear outlook, seemed to misjudge how many arcs the curve was. An arc was by far less than what it appeared. With that misunderstanding, the car would speed up and fail to take the turn, plowing on head. That was bound to happen near the national highway bridge. The cars that had plowed through crashed into the guardrail, and every year the aftermath of that would again lead to bridgework repairs.

That wasn't all, traffic accidents involving people were frequent there too.

Just before the bridge the highway intersected with a road that lead into the village. While the stoplights turned off in the night, there were stop lights about in the daytime, and pedestrian crosswalk lights were also established, yet there were no end to the count of children and elderly hit by cars as they tried to cross the road.

The cars driven by villagers were fine. The villagers knew about the stoplights and of course about the twisting farm roads near there, and they knew the nature of that curve. People from other places easily overlooked Sotoba's stoplight, and furthermore the villagers--such as Motoko herself just now was doing--would rise up from the paths between rice fields onto the highway to cross. In shock at seeing a person suddenly appear there, drivers would hastily slam on the breaks but it was a place where speeding accidents were frequent, there were times when they didn't make it in time, and the odds of any accident that did happen being severe were high. Because these assailants were overall and without fail people from other places passing through the village, Motoko's image of them was an irredeemable one defined as "outsiders: those who come to take away our children by vehicular manslaughter."

One day, somebody she'd never known or seen from somewhere else would hurt and kill her children, snatching them away. ---Motoko was unable to let go of that uneasiness, especially when she looked at the bridge, that thought would instantly rise to the surface, putting her in an unbearable mood. Her childhood friend Kanami said, with concern, that Motoko seemed to have a touch of neurosis.

(But I simply just can't let go of it...)

Motoko eyed the bridge with unease, seeing a car off on the highway that was speeding. She let out a breath and walked along the highway towards the Drive-in before the stop light. In the wide parking lot of Chigusa there wasn't so much as a shadow of a car.

As she called out and opened the door, Yano Kanami waved a hand at her. At the cool air of the AC, Motoko took a breath of a rest. Three people, neighbor housewives and one's child, were seated at the counter. Motoko turned and gave them a smile.

"Two minutes late," said Kanami with a smile. Motoko said that she was sorry while taking her apron out from the counter. Kanami lightly poked Motoko in the head. "You were spaced out looking at the highway. For the two late minutes."

Motoko admitted to it as she looked out the window. The shop was on a plot

of land shaped like an L and from the counter the view out the window overlooked the highway that lead towards Mizobe.

"Don't worry about it so much. Your kids, Shiori-chan and Shigeki-kun, are obedient ones. They won't go by the highway. It's going to be fine!"

Motoko nodded with a sound of agreement. If she said it to herself, she only made herself worry more but mysteriously when it was Kanami who would say it to her then her unease would vanish for the time being.

Motoko's childhood friend married into the city but five years ago she divorced and returned to the village. Rice fields were plowed over in order to open a drive-in for the truckers that came in and out of the village but two years ago the expressway had opened. When the shop opened, they counted on long haul truckers and opened early in the morning when they would be heading out but that all stopped two years ago. Since then, those who lived in the village continued to provide some degree of business. Thanks to the men who came to drink at night, they were just barely able to stay in business.

Motoko looked to the white board at the corner of the counter. Today's special menu was out. This morning before opening, Kanami prepared lunch portions. Making preparations for the evening meals was Motoko's job. For that she received wages akin to pocket money. Motoko herself was more focused on being with her childhood friend than earning an income so she would have been fine not receiving any pay but Kanami stubbornly insisted on treating her like a worker.

"By the way---have you heard?"

Suddenly asked that, Motoko blinked. "Have I heard what?"

"On the day of the mushiokuri, they say a moving truck came in. Last night, someone was saying that."

Last night must have meant either those who came for dinner, or otherwise those who came to drink after them.

"At the Kanemasa residence? Have they moved in?"

"Who knows? I just happened to overhear it."

As Kanami said that, Shimizu Hiroko who had been reading a magazine at the counter looked up. "I heard it too, that rumor. The one about the truck that came in when the Betto was being lit. But, they say it turned back around. They took the wrong road, I guess?"

"What?" murmured Motoko "If they turned back, then it wasn't Kanemasa. --- They still haven't move in yet have they? Into that house."

"That's right," said Hiroko as she closed her magazine. "I suppose they built it as a holiday home, I mean, they wouldn't choose to live out here of all places, more than likely."

"A holiday home that splendid? And one they went through the trouble of dismantling and reassembling?"

"There could be people like that."

"Impossible," said Tanaka Sachiko. "Who would go that far for a holiday home? In the first place, if they were building a holiday home, it would be in a more fitting place for a holiday. Somewhere where it's cool in the summer or where it's warm in the winter, a resort spot."

"Do you think it's one of those things?" mused Hiroko as she turned to face her. "A western style boarding house?"

"Oh, I doubt it."

"But there are stories like that. I mean, last year around this time--or was it further back still? Somebody had come to do an examination or an inspection for a resort facility, or something."

"Ah," Motoko nodded as she listened to the conversation. There was something like that. That was just a little before the summer, wasn't it? Taking the bypass you could get off at the Mizobe exit, that must have been why. By taking the expressway, even the outskirts of any large city were three hours away.

Sitting beside Sachiko and obediently sipping her soda, Tanaka Kaori looked at her mother. She was in her third year of middle school, which would be ninth grade, wasn't she? She was a relatively unrefined, dim young girl.

"Can they make a resort?"

"There's no way they can!" said Sachiko with a grimace. "Out here in the country. It was obviously all talk. What, did you want them to be able to?"

"Uh-uh. ...I was just wondering if it was true or not."

"Kaori-chan is a girl at that age, I bet she is thinking it'd be nice if the village opened up some." Hiroko insisted, causing Kaori to shake her head slightly.

"...Not really. I wouldn't know unless they tried but, I mean, if a bunch of strangers came in, it'd get noisy and..."

"Really? But if it came to that, you wouldn't have to get on a bus just to go out if you felt like shopping? They'd also increase the number of buses, so you wouldn't have to be kept waiting so long," said Hiroko with a sigh. "But however you think about it, it's pointless talk. In the first place, the old folks would never agree to it."

Motoko gave a single nod to this, too. There had been talks about an interchange exit for Sotoba too. There had been pointless proposals drawn up and the predecessor of Kanemasa had said that it was for Sotoba's own good, making very forceful motions to enact it. The ones who said no to it were none other than Sotoba itself. Motoko's father-in-law had been burning hot with outrage. We don't need something like that, that would only invite harm into the village and nothing more, the elderly had gathered and stated in conferences with Kanemasa countless times. Whether that did the trick or whether it was related to some other factor, at any rate the interchange was relocated to the more appropriate outskirts of Mizobe and since then the town of Mizobe had been developing rapidly.

"As convenient as you may say it is, weird people would be coming in too you know. I for one will pass on bowing to those outsiders, feeding off of whatever money they may drop."

Hearing Sachiko's words, Hiroko rested her chin in her hands. "So say we don't think of it as a boarding house. But if we call it a holiday home, it's a wastefully huge building, I wonder if they just didn't want to live here? It's a Western style house. It's the first I've ever seen one up close."

As if seeking agreement, Hiroko looked to Motoko. Motoko gave a bewildered nod.

"Really. I wonder if it's been a family home for generations? I wonder if the ones moving in aren't an old couple. I think they didn't want to part with the house they'd become accustomed to living in."

Hiroko laughed as if to poke fun at her. "Then don't you think they could just not move?"

"I'm saying, as they get older, maybe they wanted to live out in the fresh air of the country? Going through the trouble of dismantling the home and rebuilding it can only be out of a deep love of their home, I think."

"Or they just wanted to show off their house, you know?" Hiroko laughed a very playful laugh. "They might have wanted to emphasize that they're a little different from country folk."

Sachiko laughed lightly beside her. "It's hardly a house worth flaunting. It's just an old western house, and if we're talking about ages, then we could give them a good match. For the same amount of money, they could have built a whole new one, after all!"

"Well, compared to us commoners, it is clear they're living in another dimension," said Hiroko with a sigh. "In the first place, we can't even afford to reconstruct one kitchen. It's so inconvenient I'm getting bitter."

"Hiroko's home is still better than ours. It was built when you were married, wasn't it? Our kitchen's been the same since my grandmother's generation."

While listening to Sachiko and Hiroko's conversation, Motoko washed the vegetables for the day's special. There was a heavy feeling settling into her chest, brought on by the image of outsiders coming into the village that rose back up.

(Outsiders... they're coming.)

In Motoko the image of "outsiders" and the image of "those who take away my children" were too entangled to separate.

"Oh my," said Sachiko. Motoko looked up towards the highway and saw one

of those outsiders. She could feel something caught in her throat. Without knowing what weighed on Motoko's heart, Sachiko's voice was rudely loud. "Isn't that the workshop's boy, there?"

"Hey, Natsuno!"

It was Mutou Tohru, lightly honking his horn. He rolled down the car window and called out to the figure in a school uniform walking down the highway. Natsuno turned and upon realizing it was Tohru stopped walking, his face contorted into an overstated grimace.

"Where're you going in that school uniform?"

"Students have this thing called school they do. --And I told you not to call me by my first name."

Tohru laughed and told him to get in, motioning to the passenger seat. Natsuno wiped at his face with his shirt sleeve and got into the car.

"S'hot..."

"Why are you even out walking in this heat?"

"I got tired of waiting for the bus."

Tohru laughed at that dejected answer as the car took off again. While it wouldn't be unexpected for the middle school and grade school to be shut down in this village either, the high school students had to take a bus to the neighboring town. Not many of those buses ran in the middle of the day so if your timing was bad, you'd be waiting over an hour. While waiting, he discarded everything he was carrying and decided to walk to the next bus station. Sometimes he would actually meet the bus at the next station but most of the time the bus would pass him between stations and in the end he would be walking for three hours to get back to the village. ---Until two years ago, Tohru had the same thing happen to him a lot too.

"Knew I should've taken my bike. --Come to think of it, Tohru-chan, why are you cruising around here? Don't you have work?"

"Today's a training day. Once the training's over, we can go on home. You lucked out."

"Must be nice to still get paid the same."

"If you're jealous, than hurry up and graduate. Once you get your license you won't have to walk anymore either."

"No matter how much I hurry the year isn't going to. In the first place, once I graduate, you think I plan to set foot here again?" Natsuno said as he wiped his face with his sleeve again. "There's not even a train. How the hell does anyone live here?"

Tohru forced a smile. Natsuno was one of the few move-ins. His parents were eccentric, moving out into the country the year before on a whim. There were the occasional people who would move in from nearby but there wasn't anybody who came from the city. Even the people who moved in from the surrounding towns were sure to have blood ties to the village. Actually, Tohru himself was a move-in but he moved in when he was still a child. The Mutou household didn't have any blood ties to the village either but his father already worked at the village clinic so it wasn't as if they had no connection at all. Still, it seemed pretty rare. It'd be fair to say the only people eccentric enough to come to the village with no ties would be Natsuno's parents.

"You'll make your parents cry with talk like that. They're the type who wanted to finally move out into the country and be surrounded by nature in a mountain village, doing the old-timey, heart-to-heart neighbor thing and all," Tohru said as Natsuno made a face.

Natsuno's parents moved from the city looking for nature. They bought an empty house, prepared a lot and set up a workshop in the village from where they sent out furniture crafted from the fir trees. The Mutou family did indeed move in from outside of town themselves but as Tohru was raised in this village, he had a stronger sense for it. It could be inconvenient at times but he wasn't particularly unhappy with it. That said, there wasn't anything he was particularly happy with either. It was what it was. Thus he tried to understand why someone would move in suddenly.

If it was for nature, then while there were mountains and rivers, those mountains themselves were covered in man-made forests of those fir trees. He wasn't sure where the lines could be drawn at calling it nature, and if someone

called it out as just a backwater town that was behind the times, he wouldn't know how to counter. With that in mind he could see where Natsuno could be so unhappy here. Natsuno was born and raised in the city, and it seemed he couldn't stand how inconvenient life here could be. It seemed only natural when he grumbled "My parents' whim is a royal pain. Wish I'd just graduate already."

As Natsuno grumbled, Tohru made a turn at the stop light towards Sotoba. A small ways down the village road by the riverbed, there was a stationary shop just across from the grade school, where a gathering of old folks came into sight.

"They're always loitering around there."

Tohru smiled at Natsuno's words. The Takemura Stationary shop was primarily a business for children. Aside from for the children who came in on their way home from school, the customers from around the neighborhood were as rare as a cuckoo's cries. The shop had folding chairs out front, so it eventually became a place where one could usually see the elderly gathered around.

"All day every day, they sit around just sharing boring gossip. ---Ah, they were looking at us."

Tohru looked in the car mirror to see one of the old people up out of his chair as if he had been looking into the car. Natsuno sighed. "Standing to 'see us off.' They were definitely checking to see who was riding with you, just now."

"No way."

"That's definitely what it was. Every time I pass by them they staaare at me. It's like they're keeping an eye on the outsider."

Tohru forced a smile. "They're just curious. They don't have anything else to do or enjoy."

"If they're bored can't they play gate ball or something?"

Having a feeling that would probably be a better use of their time, Tohru's smile dropped. The truth was simply that new move-ins were unusual, so the people of the village were unusually interested. Those stared weren't out of any

ill will but it was sure to be unbearably depressing for the one who was the subject of those stares.

He drove down the riverbed road as he thought as much. After driving some distance, two figures, young boys in school uniforms, leisurely walking along came into view and Tohru honked his horn.

"Ooi, Tamotsu."

It was Tohru's brother. Standing beside him was Tamotsu's classmate, Murasako Masao.

Tamotsu turned with a surprised face. "We lucked out. Hey, Masao, let's hitch a ride."

Tamotsu turned and called to him, but Masao took one look at the passenger seat of the stopped car and shook his head.

"No thanks."

"Why? It's cooler in the car."

"I said no thanks. I'm walking home. If you want to ride, you go ahead and do that, Tamotsu."

At such a blunt refusal, Tamotsu looked back and forth between Masao and Tohru, giving a forced smile and a wave for them to go on. He would be fine walking with Masao. Tohru didn't pressure them, giving a wave and driving on.

"They're a rare breed."

Tohru had no response to Natsuno's annoyed voice. Masao was the third son of the Murasako rice shop. There was something he didn't like about Natsuno, some kind of prejudice he harbored against him. It might have fundamentally been uneasiness about him having come in from the city.

In a small town there was a small community but if you tried to live there, you would know there were all types. He didn't think it was a different world, like Natsuno's dad had said. It was just a village like anywhere else. While thinking as much, they drove along the road that followed the mountain stream, turning west at the bridge. Once out of the area where the houses were crowded in, past the green fields, in the western mountains was a peculiar sight: a strange

house that didn't suit the village in the slightest.

"Come to think of it, I wonder how long they're going to wait to move in? In that house."

Natsuno gave a disinterested gaze to the western mountains. "Who knows."

There was no doubt that once the new transfers came in, interest in Natsuno's household would thin out. That was how market competition worked, the market value was decided on the whims of the gossipers themselves.

"I wonder if they're ecologists like Natsuno's parents."

"Like my parents are anything as great as all that. --And stop calling me by my first name."

Tohru forced a smile. It seemed like he really hated that name his dad gave him, based on some Heian noble. He said he hated it because it sounded like a girl's name and could be almost impressively persistent in his opposition to it.

"But, your house's situation's so messed up, what do you want me to do?"

The married couple retained their maiden names. So, Natsuno's parents weren't entered in the family register together. Natsuno was entered with his mother Koide Azusa in the family register but because of the way schools were he went by his father's last name of Yuuki.

"...Talking about it's a pain," Natsuno mumbled as he looked towards the estate. "Moving out to a place like this, they're bound to be a family of helpless weirdos. ---If not that, then criminals on the run."

"It was the boy from the workshop after all." Satou Oitarou turned back towards the shop, a smile overtaking his face as if he had made a momentous discovery; in turn, Takemura Tatsu fanned herself, seeming to force a smile.

"Just like I told you." The one sounding so proud of herself was Ohtsuka Yaeko. "That was the office manager's son's car."

By office manager, they meant the senior office staff at the Ozaki clinic's front office, Mutou. Mutou was not a man of their land so there was no shop name to know him by. That was why the elderly called him 'the office manager.' In the

past year, the Yuuki family (or should they be called the Koide family?) were the same, and calling them the 'workshop' shop name became the standard.

"That is what one would look like from behind is it not?" Yaeko motioned at the shape. "A white Coup, yes? With just the two doors. With those three numbers on the plate. I know them well."

"Oh my," said Hirosawa Takeko, as if to protest. "Even I could have told you that much."

"Wasn't it you who asked who it was?"

"I meant who was in the passenger's seat. Well, I don't think it appeared to be a girl, but."

"It was the Workshop's boy." Oitarou took her seat on the folding stool with a complacent smile. "I knew with one look at the shape of his head. Knew it was right."

"He had a school uniform, didn't he?"

"That means nothing on a school day. I saw Shimizu's daughter going to school in her uniform as well."

Sitting silently in the corner of the stool area was Itou Ikumi, who did not seem to find the gossip interesting. It was as if 'how childish' were written in large print on her thin face.

Tatsu forced a smile as she gave up on fanning herself, turning on the switch to the electric fan. A light breeze was stirred but given that it was only blowing around more hot air it didn't feel the least bit cooler.

Of course the breeze from the fan wouldn't reach the seats. The heat flowed in from off of the village pavement, and without the air conditioner the shop would have been boilingly hot. It may have been something only the elderly could do, leisurely gossiping in those steaming conditions without a care.

Takemura was right off of the highway, on the village road, across the street from the grade school. Beyond Takemura was nothing more than the grade school grounds and the drive-in but as there weren't any particular side routes, most cars that came to the village would be sure to pass by Takemura. It was an

ideal place to monitor who came and went from the village (it may have missed a few cars that came from the highway to the farm roads but there weren't many of those). ---However, Oitarou and company just had too much free time on their hands, it wasn't as if they gathered to survey the cars that came through.

It was sheer practicality that had Tatsu looking towards the road. She had used to come from a family of farmers but she renovated the front area of her living room where the sliding glass doors were and crafted a shelf to stand her wares on. She cleared away her entryway and opened the area, put out some chairs and opened shop. It was right after the war.

She had family outside the village but she lost her husband in the war. And so after the war she returned empty handed and started a business. They sold notebooks, paints, protractors and compasses. Children come in to buy gym shirt logos or gymnastic caps or whatever they were lacking for school. After school they would buy some of the cheap snacks, ice cream, or juices. The grade school only had six classes in total. There was one class of each grade, and there were maybe about ten a child per class so business wasn't booming but it was enough for a single old woman to make a living.

She had spent the entire post-war period seated at that watch post like place, watching the children and the village road. Other than someone from the neighborhood stopping by, there was nothing in particular to do besides watch the road, so even without intending to memorize them, she learned which cars belonged to which families. And it wasn't just cars. Those who used the highway bus stop also passed by Takemura. Many of those who came through had previously attended the grade school, so she knew their names and faces. That was how Tatsu came to know all the comings and goings of the village.

--No, not all of them.

Come nightfall, Tatsu closed the storm shutters and stayed inside. Spending the nights like that until morning, she couldn't know about the cars that came and went before then. The moving truck that had come by in the dead of night, for example.

"....A truck, mm." Tatsu let out a sigh. She hadn't intended to say it so loudly

but it caught Oitarou's attentions.

"What was that, something about a truck was it?"

"Not really," Tatsu replied. "Nothing to say a thing about. I was just thinking what that could have been about."

"What are you talking about?" asked Yaeko.

"What this, guess nobody's told Yaeko-san yet. A truck came. During the mushiokuri."

"The Kanemasa family?"

"Nope. But I saw it when I was burning the Betto," Oitarou said, proud of himself over something. "You know, my house is right after the Sannohashi bridge after all. The Betto's burnt right there on the other edge of the river bank. That's where I saw it from, that's when the cars came through. A hauling struck and two passenger cars."

"Heh?"

"It came close to the bridge then turned on back around. The truck had a pine tree mark on it. A Takasago Pine, I think it was. Takasago Moving was written there. I confirmed it with a camera, so there's no mistaking it."

Tatsu gave a secret snicker. Oitarou had a good camera, unsuited for a man his age. It was a hand-me-down from his son in the city and had a long distance magnification lens. Oitarou came around carrying his camera but in spite of that he'd never bought film or had pictures printed. Of course, he'd never shown off any pictures he'd taken either.

Ikumi who had been standing off alone spoke. "Either way, they were sure to be no good."

Oitarou leaned forward. "No good, really?"

"They were turned out by a ceremony to ward off troubles, so they must have been trouble themselves. Something like that coming here would be horrific!"

The elderly said nothing, giving a silent shake of their heads. Ikumi was younger than the elderly gathered around. She wasn't of an age to be called

'elderly' herself but she didn't fit in with the women her own age, due to being a bit eccentric.

"...But, what a strange story."

Yaeko mumbled to herself, but Tatsu found herself nodding in her heart. A truck came into the village in the middle of the night. And yet it turned back. -- To Tatsu's recollection, this sort of thing had never happened before.

Change didn't happen in the village. Even if the people seemed different, it could all be summed up tidily by saying that they were simply country folk. Anything strange or sudden was still within the parameters of being sensibly believed, things that could be shrugged off by saying 'these things happen.' Never the less, a truck coming in the middle of the night surpassed that. ---No, it wasn't just the truck.

Tatsu watched the steam rise from the road's surface.

There was that Kanemasa house. It was sensible to believe that outsiders could move in but that building surpassed sense. It was one thing to move, but it was another thing entirely to have that building brought in from elsewhere. Why would anyone do such a thing? Were they that attached to their home or were they wanting to look down their noses at the villagers? Or possibly...

Was there a need for it? For that old fashioned, stone building?

Hirosawa pulled into his parking space in front of the house and got out of the car. He unloaded the sack of used books he had bought in town as his small daughter peeked out from behind the curtain and waved. The scent of grilled fish wafted from the house, lights on at twilight.

Before entering into the house and giving his daughter a nod, Hirosawa looked to the western mountains. The color of the sky indicated the night was far off, and from that mountain range could be seen a building. Ever since seeing the truck turned back by the mushiokuri, for some reason or other, it had been on his mind. Perhaps it was because he now realized that the building was there, so that the inhabitants were not was unnatural.

It was an old fashioned house. He'd seen many houses be built but he'd never seen one dismantled before, and he was very interested in the construction, so

very different from traditional Japanese methods with wood. In August of last year, they tore down the old mansion and began construction about a month ago, finishing off with the fence. The worker's temporary quarters on the property were dismantled. The materials were hauled out and the gates closed. It had been sitting since then in deserted silence, much to the interest of the villagers, that house.

Hirosawa hadn't heard a word about the inhabitants. He'd caught pieces of a rumor that they seemed to be from the outskirts of Tokyo. If you were having something built in the village, one would definitely use Yasumori Construction Company. No other information had leaked but he did know that this time the Yasumori Construction Company didn't receive the job. The trucks that had come to build the fence had the name of a major construction company on them, and a different prefecture's plates. Perhaps it wasn't a project that could be done by back water construction workers.

At a glance, it was a two storied building. A complex, jagged pattern adorned around it. There was a window in the steep roof, so there may have been an attic as well. Looking at the foundation, it probably had a spacious basement, too. The imposing stonework outer wall was detailed with a timber trim. It was ornate yet simple, and he wondered when it was built. It looked fantastically old fashioned and yet it didn't look to be that old in itself. If it were really that old of a building, it wouldn't have been so easy to dismantle and reconstruct elsewhere.

There weren't many windows and there didn't seem to be a porch or a veranda anywhere. He remembered watching its construction, so he thought that there was something like a bay window or two on the first floor. The windows were simple, with four corners, undecorated by any arch or such. There were slated shutters that closed tightly. No, they were more like a single slate than shutters, so maybe they were better called storm guards. It seemed like it would have poor lighting and ventilation but maybe the high ceilings would still keep it cool in the summer.

It was dignified and handsome, yet Hirosawa felt that it had the stiff feel of a fortress. The house was built on the side of the hill that faced the village as if to look down on them--or in other words, to keep watch on them. If that house

was a fortress, it was not a fortress for Sotoba; it was a bridgehead for an outsider to watch over them. But, outsiders from where?

---From the fir tree laden mountains, it projected onto Sotoba:

(The village is surrounded by death.)

"Daaaaad." His daughter opened the door. "Dinner!"

"Where's my 'welcome home'?" Hirosawa patted her head as she drug along in his wife's shoes.

"I said it before from the window. Dad's the one who didn't even say 'I'm home.'"

"I'm home."

Hirosawa gave his daughter's back a light push, stepping onto the porch. Before stepping into the entryway he gave one more look to the house thrusting up into the mountainside.

(.... Fir trees are death.)

Was that a metaphor that the author from the temple would have used?

Chapter 2

Part 1

Drawing arcs in the darkness, as if drifting, they travelled the land. A beckoning, invoked by the dead who rose from the grave, he who dispatched the will-o'-the-wisps.

The dead did not come after him. He but waited for him wherever he may go. Standing on the frozen land, vacant eyes open, he watched over him from his side as he struggled along that earth. With an ashen white face having lost its vitality, he was clad in yet more white burial clothes. In the glow of the will-o'-the-wisps they were a melancholy blue.

He dragged his feet as if to stall for time, daring to slowly approach forward towards it.

Even when finally beside him, the little brother said nothing. He was simply there with neither an outcry nor a word of malediction, and naturally without breathing a single sigh. Of course neither did he raise a hand to strike him, and he cast no stones.

He only waited to receive him. He looked as he did when alive, but with the pallor of death over him. His literally lifeless eyes had no light in them, a color well suiting the caverns they were, drawing him in closer. His powerless body was stationed there covered in burial garbs, coated in the mud of his grave.

Seishin's pencil ceased as he briefly sunk into his thoughts.

Even if the little brother had no plans of revenge, the older brother himself must have naturally believed that revenge was the reason he appeared.

Without a doubt his little brother had come to pull him into the same purgatory as himself.

When he'd first seen and became convinced of his little brother's rise from

the grave, he must have been wild with fear and fled his little brother. ---He probably did.

But, he couldn't run from the Shiki. Wherever he ran away to, his little brother was there awaiting him. After repeating that cycle, he came to at last realize he couldn't escape. Thus when he took in the sight of his little brother, he'd obediently walk on towards him but (he willingly continued to walk towards his brother but), he was always in fear that it would be this time that his little brother would inflict the wounds of vengeance on him at last.

(Revenge.....)

Seishin pondered as he looked over the paper. What was the 'revenge' he was imagining? Was he expecting the haunting to death that was so common in Japanese ghost stories? Or maybe something more straight forward, doing as he had, taking up a weapon and attacking him. Or maybe he was still deciding on his means of revenge, with this land as the stage.

For a time Seishin gazed at his writing, thinking that he wanted revenge to take on a fitting form. Something abstract--something vague. He searched through his memories of all times and places but he couldn't call to mind anything of that nature. As he searched his memory, he thought about whether he had any reference materials of that nature but that search again came up empty.

Seishin breathed a soft sigh, looking up at the office blackboard. He withdrew

his consciousness from the manuscript (from the frozen wasteland), suddenly aware of the afternoon sunlight filling the office, the artificial chill of the air conditioner, and noticing the sounds of the cicadas beyond the window.

July 27th. Wednesday afternoon, there were two appointments for the day, but they were to be handled by Tsurumi and Ikebe. Seishin gathered his writing paper and returned it to the drawer. Turning the paper face down he placed a paperweight over it, closed the drawer and stood. Just as he was stepping out of the office, Miwako came by carrying a large kettle.

"Oh, are you heading out?"

"I am going to the library for a bit. --Mother, would you like me to bring you anything?" Seishin asked, Miwako giving a smile.

"I will pass. Have a safe trip."

With a nod, Seishin turned towards the entryway. Stepping out past the dirt floor, the midsummer rays were dazzlingly bright on the compound. The voice of the cicadas descended on him. The shrubbery were a lively green, and the foot path's stone paving from the mountain gates to the main temple, to the temple office driveway, and continuing to the head priest's quarters' entryway, was baked white. They must have known he was going out; an uncounted number of the old folks about had given polite bows and salutations.

"Oh my, Junior Monk." The voice came from a corner of the greenery. The old woman by the Japanese box tree at the entryway bowed her straw-hat wearing head to him. "Are you going out?"

It'd been a while since he'd seen that face. Did she take the trouble of coming because it was just before Bon? Seishin returned her greeting. "It's been some time. Thank you for coming when it is so hot."

"It's nothing. This year is the thirteenth anniversary of Ojii-chan's death, so I'll be counting on you again."

"Yes. Likewise."

"How is the Head Monk's health?"

A year and a half ago, his father Shinmei had suffered a stroke. Since then he had been living confined to the bed.

"Well, thank you for asking. He's been able to talk quite a bit recently."

"That's right fine to hear," said the old lady wiping her face with the towel

around her neck. "That's right; just lately, I saw something wrote by you, Junior Monk, in some kind of magazine. It was an essay wasn't it? It was a short one, came across it in the hospital's waiting room."

"Ah," said Seishin with a bitter smile. The director of the Ozaki Hospital knew that Seishin would hate it, so he went through the trouble of buying the magazine that had the article in it and sat it in his waiting room. Seishin offered no comment, replying only with: "Is that right."

"Oh my, and now I've kept you! Do take care," said the old woman bowing her head deeply. He returned her bow and went from the driveway entrance to into the garage where he got in the car. The library wasn't so far one would need to drive, rather it was the perfect distance for a walk, for a change of pace, but right then the sun's rays were raining down incessantly. Furthermore if he went through the village in mid-day on foot, he would be caught at each parishioner's house one by one and would never get anywhere. As he was in a mood to hurry, he used the car.

While driving he rolled down the windows and turned on the air conditioning to chase the hot air out. The elderly saw him off. He may have had a side job in writing literature but Seishin's profession was that of a monk. They were the village's chief temple and ever since his father had fallen ill, Seishin bore the weight of the temple's families.

Receiving the formal salutations from the elderly, he slowly passed through the grounds towards the belfry before getting onto the private road. The stone stairway path down from the mountain gate wasn't long but that of course was not possible for a car to traverse. Thus a private road was established by the

belfry. Following it, the road came out at the lumber yard adjoined to the Maruyasu sawmill. The private road's concrete was baked white and the voices of the cicadas forming an umbrella over the path were dry. It was a quintessential seething summer scene.

There was unusually little rainfall this year and the heat was atrocious. The car drove towards the east, onto the village road that followed the river, where the water level was low and the riverbed's dry planes had grown as a result. The rainy season dawned as it was without a proper rain. The town of Mizobe had appropriately river-like rivers but this mountain stream was fed only by the Omi River. With a water shortage downstream, Sotoba drew out water from the river. There was damage from the heat. It had been a harsh summer.

Following the stream south, he went past the vicinity of the first bridge that went towards the shrine. On the other bank of the river was the grove of the village shrine so green it practically stung the eyes. Going further down the village to second bridge, to the urban heart of Sotoba, was the region between the second bridge and the third bridge. The third bridge was formerly known as the boundary of Sotoba.

Sotoba was originally a village settled on temple grounds, opened by woodworkers, and until the temple territory was split up, all of Sotoba was one neighborhood hamlet. Surrounded by mountains on three sides, the gathering of six neighborhoods, with an added scattering of houses in the northern mountain territory added as another territory, the seven were generally referred to as "the village of Sotoba." In recent years it was annexed into the town of Mizobe, all lumped together into one portion of Mizobe called "Sotoba," but the villagers and those surrounding the area still called it a village, and the post office designation still read village, so the seven neighborhood

names lived on.

There were just under four hundred houses, and the population was only 1,300 people making for a very small village but it still had the assets from when it had been run with a village's structure, and it was maintained if only so that it could continue to keep up appearances as a village proper. The community Seishin approached held one of such maintained facilities.

Near the second bridge's vicinity came into view the old style building beside the village road, made of wood with a tile roof. This building that resembled an old fashioned school was once the village town hall and was now the community center. Since the village was annexed into Mizobe, the town hall was now being used as a community center, and one portion became a library. One might think it obvious to write off the collection of books as the meager collection expected of a country library, but in this Sotoba was extraordinary. The temple, the Ozakis, and the Kanemasas's predecessors had arranged for the donation of a rather large collection of books, and when the Kanemasas left the village, they had donated a large sum of books and archives that Seishin made use of. Of course, there wasn't much in the way of light reading material, so it wasn't very popular with the villagers.

He pulled the car into the community center lot, one turn after the Ohkawa liquor store, and entered the building. Inside the antiqued building was a small hall and meeting rooms for gatherings, where each association and business would hold their meetings. Through the wide open windows, the sound of playing children's voices was heard. Attached to the community center was a children's hall that housed a nursery school, another business within the community center. The costs of the hall's frequent maintenance fell upon the temple---on the Muroi, Ozaki and Kanemasa households. The households of

Muroi and Ozaki, and the Kanemasa house had always continued to support the village thusly.

Paying respect to the acquaintances he passed, Seishin headed towards the old library. Sitting behind the counter that was like an old world relic was the librarian, Yuzuki.

"Well, Junior Monk, good afternoon. Are you researching something?"

"Sorry for the trouble. Please let me in."

The library's collection of books was spread across two depositories in the building. As they seemed to be the type villagers would generally have no interest in, including the old archives, they were kept in a non-self-serve section. There was a rule against entry, but none the less in Seishin's case it was overlooked.

With a nod of his white haired head, Yuzuki took the archive key out of the desk drawer. Just as he had taken it out, two children from the nursery school came rushing to the counter. Giving a broad smile, Yuzuki took the books they held out and processed them for lending. Yuzuki was a gentle man, with an introverted personality and a reputation for being loved by children. He knew what children liked and often looked after and talked to them, making him known and loved as the "nice old man at the library."

"As expected, it's busy once summer vacation starts," Yuzuki said to Seishin with a delighted smile. "If only it were always like this. Children today have so many more fun things than books."

As Yuzuki said such, he looked to compare the children's room to the open stacks reading room. "Still, it's better on the children's side. As for in here, guests are as rare as a cuckoo's cry."

There was nobody in the reading room lined with books targeted to adults. Seishin came to the library often but he hardly ever recalled seeing a villager in the reading room. It was more common to see someone who liked books taking them out, or on occasion he may see people taking notes, usually a group of high school students, though only sometimes.

"As for yourself, Junior Monk, how is your writing going? When can we expect a new work?"

"Who knows?" Seishin prevaricated with a smile. "I'm just now finally getting started on one."

"Is that right?" said Yuzuki with a smile, inviting him into the office and towards the archives.

The distinguishing characteristic of the archives was the presence of old books, something Seishin liked. Entering the storage room and turning on the desk lamp near the door, he scoured the shelves. The books were precisely stowed according to the classification system.

If one met an unnatural death at the hands of their elder brother, and if that little brother were to take up revenge against his killer, what means would he take? The little brother by no means wished for revenge but the older brother should have been in fear that he did.

All the same, the little brother would not take revenge on him. Neither cursing nor blaming him, he only accompanied him. Since the first night, reappearing every night since, he continued that pattern.

At first he was afraid, and then he became despondent knowing his little brother had no intent to inflict harm upon him.

If his little brother had come for revenge, how much better it would be.

That was, of course, a fearful prospect in itself but,

If he would inflict injury on him thusly, if in trying to take his life away his little brother would become another killer like himself, if he would take up such actions for him, he was likely to draw a tangible sense of salvation from that.

But, his little brother did not.

The victim who would not try to inflict harm upon him made it clear there was no escape from his sin. His little brother was no killer. He was not a sinner. He was the only one who was a killer, a breaker of divine law.

(He...) Seishin thought as he turned the pages (may perhaps be in despair.)

He wanted his little brother to plot revenge and become the same repulsive being he was, to become a killer no different from himself. But, the little brother did not live up to his expectations. He knew he had no will to fulfill them by his little brother's empty stare. Unable to bear it he would lash out at his brother. ---He was sure to do that.

He lambasted him for being cowardly, unable to even take revenge, scorned him, even condemned him. And still

his little brother neither struck him nor lambasted him. He merely stood quietly by, his hollow eyes turned towards him.

His provocations had failed. He was only more stricken by this, and dropped to his knees before his little brother.

He prostrated himself in fear upon the earth, apologizing, clinging to his burial clothes and groveling for forgiveness.

----And all the while, his little brother's hollowed eyes only gazed at that spectacle.

He stared back at his little brother, until without knowing when, he averted his eyes. His head hung in shame, in order to avoid his little brother's empty stare, and he set out, further from the hill where his little brother should have

laid buried.

There was nothing left he could do. He could neither run nor chase him away, he could do nothing but monologue about forgiveness to his little brother while traveling the wasteland.

With his head hung low, and without turning to look at his little brother under any circumstances, while neither acknowledging nor denying his little brother's presence at the edge of his field of vision in which he was ever aware of him, he continued to walk.

The will-o'-the-wisps crept over the land, fluttering in the dry winds as they drew their arcs, illuminating his and the corpse's path. Taking in the highs and lows of the land with his gaze and the soles of his feet, they walked in tacit silence. Always in the corner of his sight was his little brother's flickering form, shadowed by the faint smell of death's rot. It would not allow him the mercy of forgetting his sin and all that was associated with it, nor even the mercy of wearing it down.

And perhaps in its own way that was his little brother's means of revenge. No, if this was not a part of his brother's revenge, it may have been another part of his curse, along with the hill that never grew further away and that splendor at its summit.

---Therefore thou art cursed, no longer one of the land, an eternal vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

Rummaging through the books in the archive and taking down notes or just things that came to mind, by the time Seishin had left the archives, two hours had already passed. The summer sun's rays were beginning to fade to the hue of twilight.

"I'm sorry, about taking so long." Seishin called out, causing Yuzuki to turn from the children he was talking to.

No, no, he smiled, an illustrated encyclopedia of insects on hand, holding onto a paper sack the children had put a rhinoceros beetle into. They probably came to ask him what kind of bug it was.

It was a charming enough scene to bring a smile to Seishin's face as he returned the key to Yuzuki. He checked out three books. Just as he was saying his thanks, as Yuzuki told him to come by again at any time, there was a piercing, shrill noise. It was the sound of a car's breaks, then the sound of something tumbling.

Yuzuki's expression changed and he rushed to the window. Seishin followed after him, rushing, seeing the village road that was, due to a dip, at eye level with the window, and on the black car on that road. Lodged into its fender was a child's bicycle.

"Are you all right?!" Yuzuki shouted, a rare occurrence, his expression a rare one as well as he rushed out of the library. Seishin followed after him from the community center to the village road. Just as Seishin and Yuzuki came running, the driver had taken the bicycle in his arms and threw it to the side of the road.

"Is he hurt?!"

At the sound of Yuzuki's voice, three children that had been crouched at the roadside looked up. Catching sight of Yuzuki, they burst out crying. The driver didn't even bother to look to that scene, tossing the bicycle to the side of the street and moving back around the front of the car into the driver's seat. He

seemed distinctly burdened by having to remove an obstacle from the car's passing.

"Hey, you!"

The one to come running out of the neighborhood liquor store was its shopkeeper, Ohkawa Tomio. Ohkawa's angry voice rang out as he rushed to the car, catching the driver's side door as he had tried to close it. A black Mercedes was a sight that had never been seen in the village. The driver was also an unknown face. He wasn't from the village. As if he didn't even realize the situation he was in, he stared forward with a glassy and emotionless expression.

"Anyway, get on out of the car."

The man gave no response to Ohkawa's demand. He appeared to be in his early fifties, and in fitting with the car he dressed as if he were influential and important, a man in good shape but never the less his eyes were muddled and lifeless. Seishin's immediate impression was that the man was dead drunk.

"You don't have half a mind to get out and check on the kid? Where the hell are you from?"

From what Seishin could see, the children weren't in critical condition. Even so, one was squatting and holding his leg, clinging to Yuzuki and wailing.

Whether he was hurt or just surprised, if he could cry, then it wasn't a worst-cast scenario at least.

"What's wrong? Were you hit?" Seishin asked, and the child nodded. He was probably a lower primary school student. The bicycle thrown to the side of the road was a small child's sized one, and the back wheel was bent. As Seishin was taking in these details, there was the sound of the transmission releasing. As the car started moving, Ohkawa's angry voice raged out.

"Hey! You!"

Seishin was startled. The driver started driving with the door still open. With the door caught in his hand, Ohkawa, a man built like a giant, was being pulled along. The car kept on like that along the village road, swirving towards the river before pulling the door shut and speeding far off and away.

"Ohkawa-san, are you all right?!"

Ohkawa, who had been thrown into the roadside bushes made a face as he pulled himself up. With his rage clear in his expression he glared at the leaving car.

"Who the hell does he think he is!" Ohkawa snapped as if spitting out the words, turning to Seishin. "Junior Monk, did you see the plates?"

Seishin shook his head. It had all happened so fast that his mind hadn't gotten around to it.

"Didn't seem to be a villager, did he? Never seen a car like that. Damn it, bunch of good for nothings coming and going here lately." Ohkawa stared off in the direction the car had left, lamenting. "Anyway, we need to contact Officer Takami-san---" He suddenly said, turning as if he'd just remembered the crying children. "No, guess these kids come first. How're they?"

"It doesn't appear to be serious. But we should bring him to the hospital. I came by car, so."

Ohkawa breathed a sigh and crouched beside the children. "Now, no more crying. The Junior Monk's gonna take you to the doctor."

Agreeing with Ohkawa's words, Yuzuki comforted the children, patting them each one by one on the head.

"Damn, what a punk," Ohkawa spit out, turning to Seishin. "I'll leave the boy to you. I'll go to report to Takami-san."

Seishin nodded. The villagers must have heard about the fuss, as they started

gathering.

The one who was injured was a child from Shita-Sotoba called Maeda Shigeki.

"Bruises and scrapes. He wasn't hit by the car, they're probably from falling off the bike," Toshio said looking at the X-ray. "The car itself couldn't have been going that fast could it? Doesn't look like he got any head injuries either, so he got off pretty light."

Seishin breathed a light sigh of relief. The local officer Takami who was looking at the X-ray from behind Seishin breathed a similar sigh. "That, it's good. --What a relief."

The only ones in the examination room were Toshio and Seishin, along with Takami. The family hadn't come yet. Seishin didn't know the child who had been injured. The boy himself gave his name and address, but when they called nobody was there. It was possible that they were out in the fields or the mountains. They had just contacted the neighbors to look for the family.

"Still," Toshio said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I'm not clear on what happened. You don't remember the car?"

Seishin nodded. "I don't think that it was a villager. I didn't know their face and such."

"Can you write it off that easy? You didn't know Shigeki-kun's face either."

"He isn't from one of the parish families, not that I know all of the kids of the parish either. At any rate, I think that car is a different matter. It was a black Benz."

"Ah ha," Toshio nodded.

Takami nodded as if thinking the same thing. "I see, I've never seen a Benz before. If we're talking about foreign cars in this village, only the Junior Doctor's wife's BMW comes to mind."

Toshio laughed. "Towada-kun from my office drives a Golf, and Nurse Shiomi-kun has a Mini."

"Whoops," said Takami, smacking his forehead.

"---But, well, it's true there're no Benzes around. If there was someone driving a car like that, the rumors would get around. But Takami-san, better look into it

just in case."

Takami nodded. "Of course. It was a hit and run after all. And furthermore it shows ill will that they drove off dragging Boss Ohkawa by the door. But Doctor, there isn't anyone in the village who would do such a thing, either."

"Desperate times, desperate measures and all that jazz."

"But," Seishin interposed. "There was something off about the driver. I don't know how best to put it but... yes, it did seem like he was under the influence. And not as if he had been drinking alcohol but as if he had taken a drug."

Seishin recalled the driver's tired expression.

"That's, it doesn't sound like anyone from the village, does it?"

"Better not to make snap judgments like that, Takami-san. Seishin, have you ever even seen a drug addict?"

"I haven't, but he did seem to be drunk. Yet he didn't have the reddened face of someone who had been drinking. Ohkawa-san had said he didn't smell like alcohol either."

"Old man Taki said something similar," Takami said scratching his head with his ballpoint pen. "He said he had seen a car through the window at the water company. He didn't know the type of car but it was a big black one. It seems it was driving through the village weaving back and forth. Just when he'd wondered if they were drunk, there was that mess. He came rushing onto the scene, fussing that he knew there would be an accident."

"Hnn."

"If only the village had a branch office out here," Takami said with a huff. "He said it was going north, so if there were someone checking comings and going for the village, the way that car stood out, it would have been over before it started. Even though a call did come into the office, the patrol car rushing from there didn't make it in time. He's probably made his way around and escaped out of the village by now."

"Probably. And with a bruised and scratched up victim."

"That's right," Takami muttered, before seeming to realize something as he looked up from his memo pad. "Say, Junior Monk. That couldn't have been the Kanemasa house's family's car, could it?"

Seishin blinked. "Kanemasa---what?"

"They're the kind of people to build up that kind of house, doesn't it seem like they'd drive a Benz too?"

"However, nobody has moved into that house yet?"

"But, hey, there was talk about a moving truck coming in during the mushiokuri."

"But we're talking about coming and moving in," Toshio interrupted. "Since then, I haven't heard anything about them moving in, and it doesn't look like anyone's moved in either does it?"

"Do you think they may have moved in in secret?"

Toshio laughed in amazement. "You think someone could get away with that in this village? Even without the layout, that house's under so much attention that if there was even a hint of someone having moved in there, the next day it'd be all over the village."

"That's true, I guess. ... Then, the people of that house may have come to see how things were or...?"

"If that's how it is, it's not impossible I guess," Toshio said looking to Seishin. "But you saw his face didn't you? Later on, when the master of the house does move in, you'll know him if you see him."

"Only if I were to meet him right away," Seishin answered. It was a sudden affair, so fast that he didn't even think to read his license plate after all, so he was sure to be a bit unreliable. He recalled that something was off with his eyes but, if asked about the other features on his face he wasn't as confident.

Toshio gave an exaggerated sigh. "All that's left is to try asking the old bags at Takemura then. You said he came on the village road, that bunch watches who comes in don't they? If we're lucky they might even remember the plates."

Seishin and Takami exchanged wry smiles. The old folks in the neighborhood all gathered around the Takemura stationary shop's shop front. It wasn't as if they were truly conducting surveillance, probably, but when it came to those coming and going from the village they were unsettlingly well informed.

While wearing that forced smile, Takami scratched at his close-cropped hair. "At any rate, I will at least ask if there were any who had seen the car. It's, if we don't handle this well the culprit may get away."

Just as Takami was saying that with a mix between a mumble and a sigh, a shrill sound came from the direction of the waiting room. Immediately Nurse Ritsuko's face appeared in the examining room door.

"Uhm, Doctor. It's Maeda Shigeki-kun's mother."

"For now bring her into the treatment room and let her see Shigeki-kun. She should calm down once she sees him. I'll be right there."

"Yes," Ritsuko said with a nod. Hurried footsteps carried past the examining room. There was the stampeding sound of someone entering the treatment room partitioned off with a single screen, then the sound of a woman sobbing out as if an emotional dam had been broken.

While listening to that hysterical voice scream Shigeki's name, Toshio approached the treatment room. Seishin and Takami followed. There was the boy lying on the bed, the middle aged woman holding him to her breast, and another woman of the same age watching over the scene. She was one Seishin recognized. She was Yano Kanami of the Drive-in Chigusa.

Kanami was the first to notice Toshio. She gently nudged the woman who appeared to be Shigeki's mother, and that woman lifted her face. Looking at the three men in the room and comparing them, she suddenly released the child and stood.

"Is that the man who ran over Shigeki?!"

Her glare was aimed directly at Seishin, to his bewilderment. It was a ghastly sight, maybe because she came rushing at him, her face covered in so much

sweat it was as if a bucket of water were dumped on her, her tangled hair sticking to her pallid face. Kanami stopped the woman rushing at him with a wordless scream, and Takami rushed up seeming flustered himself.

"Ah, no! It wasn't him, Ma'am. He's just the one who brought your son here."

"Then where's the culprit?!"

The boy who had been abandoned by the shrill voiced woman looked afraid now himself.

"Well, that is, he ran away."

"You're lying, he ran him over, didn't he!"

"Motoko." The one who called out to the screaming woman was Yano Kanami. "This isn't the one. See, he's the Junior Monk from the temple. Your family isn't part of the parish so you might not know him but I'm very familiar with him."

At those words Motoko looked up to Kanami as if a switch was flipped. Kanami wore an awkward smile. "So, you see? You can calm down."

"Then----" Motoko looked between Seishin and Kanami. "Who ran over Shigeki?"

"About that," said Takami approaching Motoko's side. "For now, let me tell you what we know. It seems like the culprit wasn't a villager."

Just as he was explaining that, Motoko's voice rung out in another wordless shriek. Looking as if she could faint any moment she turned to Toshio.

"Shigeki--is Shigeki all right?!"

"As you can see, he's just fine," Toshio answered blithely. He was clearly more interested in Motoko's state. "Just some scratches and bruises. I took an X-ray just in case, and there's nothing abnormal. Tomorrow he'll be able to go do radio exercises and run amok."

Motoko blinked slowly, then, as if her body itself were not quite right, once again broke down crying. Toshio forced a smile and turned his eyes to Ritsuko, standing stock still with bewilderment. "If you ask me which is worse off, I'd said the mom at this point. Ricchan, calm her down and explain the state of his injuries to her."

"Yes," Ritsuko nodded. Toshio motioned for Yano Kanami, beckoning her to the examination room.

"You're Kanami-san from Chigusa, aren't you?"

"That's right. Motoko was working at the shop with me at the time."

"Ah, I see. The missus of the Maeda house seems a little distracted right now so for the time being I'll explain things to you. Later you can explain things to her if she doesn't seem to understand."

"Eh---yes," she said, then giving a smile to Seishin. "Junior Monk, I'm sorry about her. Motoko has been always neurotic about her children."

Seishin shook his head saying it was nothing as Kanami bowed her head. "You transported Shigeki-kun here, didn't you? I thank you very much. With Motoko in that state, please accept my thanks in her stead."

"No, think nothing of it. Motoko-san must be very distraught."

Kanami wore a troubled smile, as if to say 'really.' "Motoko's house is near the highway. I mean, there are a lot of accidents on the highway, aren't there? So,

she can be prone to brooding sometimes about her children possibly being hit by an outsider driving down the highway or something like that. I really have no excuse for her."

"Ah," mumbled Seishin. Kanami had used the word "brooding" but for Motoko that may have been more of a fearful fixation. Once she heard her child was in an accident, her mind leaped to the worst circumstances imaginable, he didn't doubt.

"That is--Motoko-san must have been deeply worried."

"They're not any injuries to worry about at all. When he was first brought in, he was a little dazed from the shock but he calmed down quickly enough to give his name, address and phone number right and all. There wasn't anything out of place on the X-rays, so beyond the bruises and scrapes you can see, there's no outstanding injuries. Anyway, the victim himself was pretty surprised, and since he is a kid, he might not calm down for two or three days but he should be back to normal soon enough."

"Then, it really isn't anything serious is it?"

"Rather than saying he was hit by a car it'd be more accurate to say his back wheel was hit and that he fell over. He's a kid so it was a mental shock, I think he might have a fever from that too but it's nothing to worry about. If it does seem worrisome, I can prescribe a stabilizer if he's brought in for treatment."

"Yes," Kanami said with a relieved smile. "I'm relieved. I think Motoko will be relieved too."

"By the way," Takami interrupted. "Your place is right at the village entrance isn't it?"

"It is. It is but, what about it?"

"Well, you see, it's about the black Benz that threw Shigeki-kun off his bike, I was wondering if maybe you'd seen anything or..."

Kanami blinked. "A black... Benz, was it?"

"Yes."

"I saw it. Then, that's the car that got Shigeki-kun?"

"You did? ---Any chance you got the plates or..."

"No, I didn't. But a black foreign car going towards Mizobe did come into the

parking lot."

"Towards Mizobe?" As Takami asked that, Seishin tilted his head in thought. The Drive-in Chigusa was at the intersection of the highway and the village, on the Mizobe side. If the car were going towards Mizobe and entered into the Chigusa parking lot, that would mean it had already been past the village road.

"Yes," Kanami said with a meek nod. "I heard a horn honk. And then, a black foreign car pulled into the lot from the highway bridge, grazing by a truck as it passed. Motoko had said 'what dangerous driving!' about them. That car turned around in the parking lot and went back towards the village. It was zigzagging as it drove..."

"Did you see the driver's face?"

"Yes. It was an unfamiliar face. I don't think they were from the village. I thought they must have overlooked the village road and gone past it. But he was driving so recklessly, the man driving himself seemed to be staggered or---" Kanami hesitated to speak. "Even though he was turning back, when he turned the steering wheel, his head lulled forward like this, tilting. I wondered if he was all right?" Kanami said, adding on uneasily: "It was an elegant car, even Motoko was saying that. That maybe that was someone from Kanemasa."

Part 2

With still no sign of rain the end of July approached. After seeing off the last patient on the afternoon of Saturday the 30th, Ritsuko pulled the curtain shut and turned towards the entryway, the cloudless blue sky still looming overhead. The strong rays of the sun scorched the scenery in white. The shadows that fell were tiny, but dark as if painted on.

Ritsuko's eyes narrowed against the brightness outdoors and pulled closed the curtain to dull the sun. Just then a wheezing like noise of the scooter came. The old worn out scooter pulled into the lot staggeringly, coming to a stop beneath the small shadow cast before the entryway.

Ritsuko forced a smile as she took the closed curtain and half-opened it. From behind, she heard Isaki Satoko's voice.

"Ricchan, an emergency?"

Satoko had already changed clothes and had her bag in hand.

"It's the Obaa-chan of the Murasako household."

"Oh."

"It's all right. We're finished for today. You're going to eat with everyone right? Don't mind, go on ahead."

"You don't mind? I'm sorry!" Satoko said making an apologetic gesture, disappearing towards the back entrance just as the front entrance opened.

"Uhm... is now a bad time?"

The one who hobbled in with her helmet in one hand, the coating fading off of it, was Murasako Mieko of Yamairi. She was at an age where just seeing her straddle a scooter was cause for fear, but living out in Yamairi, she couldn't get by without at least driving a scooter.

"Come in." Ritsuko stood on the clay floor of the entryway, inviting Mieko inside. Bowing her head several times, Mieko passed by, opening the curtain again.

"On Saturdays, it's only until noon, I know. I'd gotten out of the house late. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. Are you here for Gigorou-Ojii-chan's medicine?" Ritsuko asked as she moved around into the reception counter. As she was halfway there, Mutou poked his face out.

"Ricchan, it an emergency?"

"It's Mieko Obaa-chan. ---It's all right, please, go ahead and have lunch!"

Ritsuko said as much as she entered the reception area but Mutou came following after her.

"Sorry for the trouble." Mieko apologized across the counter, wiping away the sweat on her brow as if she had no excuse for herself.

Mutou smiled and lightly waved his hand. "Nah, don't mind it a bit. It's hot, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Gigorou-san's medicine, yes? --Ricchan, I'll go get the records," Mutou said. Ritsuko nodded and went deeper into the office towards the pharmacy.

"And how is Gigorou-san's health?"

"About that, these past few days it hasn't been good, so..."

"Oh?"

The northern community separated in the mountains, Yamairi, had only three inhabitants left, old folks who lived draped over the area. One of them was Ohkawa Gigorou, with a history of high blood pressure which he took medication for. Gigorou himself came for his medicine but on occasion the neighbors Murasako Hidemasa or Mieko would come.

"That's no good, is it? Wouldn't it be better to have the Junior Doctor have a

look at him?"

"I'm thinking it's a summer cold is all. --Actually, my husband has one, himself."

"My, is he all right?" Interrupted Yasuyo. Carrying a cup of barley tea in hand, she placed it atop the counter. "It's hot, isn't it? Here, have this."

"Oh my, I'm so sorry, on top of coming in after hours."

"It's quite all right. No one wants to go out in the heat, we're all dawdling around the office still anyway," said Yasuyo. "How is Gigorou-san? Does he have a fever?"

Mieko waved her hand. "It doesn't look like he has a fever. If it's not a summer cold, maybe the summer heat is getting to him."

"She says Murasako-Ojii-chan has a summer cold," added Mutou, causing Mieko to wave her hand again.

"Oh, I don't think it's anything big. My husband doesn't have any kind of fever either. But, he's just sort of spaced out. He seems slack, always nodding off to sleep, though."

"Oh dear me," murmured Yasuyo. "Talk to the doctor, it might be best to have him take some medicine after all, don't you think?"

Mutou added in again "Yasuyo-san, I'm going to go put in a word with the doctor."

"Oh, no, my, that's..."

"It's nothing, we'll just ask him quickly," Mutou said easily as he stepped out of the receptionist's office. Watching Mutou jog off towards the residential side of the building, Yasuyo offered Mieko a seat.

"It will just be a moment. --Has Gigorou-san been eating all right, with this heat? Or is he working too hard?"

"If only he were that noble a man. But no, he himself says he's just tired from going out."

"Well, that's nice isn't it? A vacation?"

"Oh, I don't think it's anything big. A few days ago, he had a guest at his home. He came in a very nice car. I don't remember what that kind of car was called, though. But as soon as I'd said what a grand car it was, he said that he had someone to meet and went out. He didn't say who he was meeting or where he was going, though."

"Heeh?."

"It sure seemed like it'd have been a story to hear though. He left in high spirits and didn't come back all night. If he was going to stay out, he could at least stay he's going to be out before he goes, though."

Yasuyo smiled. It seemed Gigorou, who lived alone, ate dinner at the Murasako house. Even if they lived in different houses, they were practically family.

"Out all night without a word to anyone. Gigorou-san, you sly dog," said Yasuyo, raising a laugh from Mieko.

"He'd be doing well for his age to come home well. But the next day, when he came back, he looked like the life was drained out of him, spacing out. If he hadn't said himself he was worn out, I'd think it was a summer cold, just like I'd been saying. I mean really, he's become so sluggish it's unbearable. Since then, he's just been hard and fast asleep."

"Well dear me. That's worrisome."

"He doesn't have a fever. In fact, he's almost cool to the touch. His color's no good, but it doesn't seem like his blood pressure's high or anything."

"And your husband, Mieko-san, is he the same way?"

"Why he is, he is just like Gigorou-san, indeed. Maybe he'd gotten Gigorou's summer cold, I'd thought to myself, but. If my husband weren't like that himself, I'd have had him bring me by car, after all."

"I wonder if that doesn't sound like something the doctor should look at for you after all."

"Of course not. If he sleeps, he'll recover."

"--Poor guy. Getting an amateur's diagnosis."

The one whose voice was tinged with a laugh was Toshio.

"Oh, Doctor. I am sorry for today," Mieko said bowing her head deeply as if profoundly ashamed for troubling him from the very bottom of her heart.

"And? What's up with Gigorou-san?"

Toshio invited Mieko back towards the examination room to check her over as Yasuyo went into the medication room. Ritsuko was just finishing putting a rubber band around the medicine.

"Did the doctor come back in?"

"Mmhm. Say what they will about him, that man is a diligent doctor."

Ritsuko smiled. "He is. ---But it'd still be better if he could watch that mouth of his."

"Never happening, never happening. I've worked here since that one was a child so I'm alllll too familiar with him, he's always been contrary. The more you tell him to watch what he says to the people around him, the more he wants to say the worst."

Ritsuko smiled, offering no comment.

It wasn't long before the Toshio they were speaking of came out with Mieko.

"Ricchan, I gave her her medicine," Toshio said, handing her the file before turning back to Mieko. "Anyway, if it looks bad, have him come in for an exam. If he can't make it in, I'll come give one, so call me."

"I'm truly sorry for the trouble."

"Whether it's a cold or the heat, don't take it lightly. Old people can drop dead in no time flat."

Yasuyo raised her brows as if to chide him for saying something unnecessary again as Ritsuko sputtered out a laugh. But still, as Toshio headed back towards the main wing of his house, Mieko saw him off with a polite bow of her head.

Part 3

"Kaori, how long are you going to sleep?"

Her mother Sachiko pulled open the small flower patterned curtain. The white rays of the sun shone directly in Kaori's face, making her roll over in her sleep on top of the futon.

"Hot....."

"It's because you're sleeping so late. It's already ten o'clock! Get up and eat breakfast. It hasn't been put up yet."

Kaori sighed at that distant voice. Sweat clung to her body all over, weighing her down. She didn't have an appetite but if she said that she didn't want it she'd be scolded to 'think of the person who went through the trouble to make it for you!' which she would be without a doubt, so with no other choice she rose. The light summer towel-like blanket stuck to her body, an unpleasant feeling.

It was now August and there was still no rain. With the end of a rainy season that was a rainy season in name only, the frustratingly clear weather continued. The days of a consecutive heat wave heated the air itself, and the nights couldn't clear away the heavy heat by the time the sun rose again. It felt like the heat was only building up in the atmosphere day by day.

"I want an air conditioner..."

Kaori brushed up her sweat drenched hair. Kaori's room had good ventilation. In the mornings it was cool, so there had never been much need for an air conditioner before but this year's summer was special. She couldn't sleep well until late at night, then the sun rose and she'd wake up hot. She clung to the bed sleepily, but she wouldn't be left to sleep as she liked.

"Stop saying such spoiled things, how about waking up while it's still cool in the morning instead?"

With a mumble of "Yes'm," Kaori watched her mother leave the room. Sluggishly getting dressed before heading downstairs, she was feeling just a little bit cooler. She washed her face and went to the living room where only her serving of breakfast was still sitting out. As she wearily began to eat, with a thump thump came the boisterous footsteps of her little brother Akira.

"What? Kaori, you're just now eating breakfast?"

Akira was two years younger than her and had just entered middle school, putting him in the prime age of cheekiness. He even addressed Kaori without any honorific.

"You're perky today. Even though it's this hot."

"I don't have as much fat on me weighting me down as Kaori does."

"Yes, yes," Kaori muttered. Akira's body heat raised the room's temperature. She couldn't get into the mood to fight with him.

"Hey, want me to give you a chill?" Akira made a face as if planning a prank.

"No thanks. I'm sure you're not thinking of anything good."

"It's not like that," Akira said, his mouth tapering to a sour point. "I heard the family moving into Kanemasa's shown up."

Thinking 'no way', Kaori looked to Akira's face. "Shown up nothing, there's nobody living there is there?"

"Right. Even though no one's living there, people've seen people's shadows they're saying. From the window, all looking out."

"So they have moved in?"

Akira's shoulders sank as if drained of strength. "That's not what I'm talking about at all. Look, in the old house, something had to have happened. I'm talking about ghosts hanging around, and sometimes, they look out the window!"

Nibbling the end of her chopsticks, Kaori tilted her head. "...That'd be weird."

"Why?"

"Because, that building looks old but it was just built recently. Nobody could have lived in it yet, could they? That house couldn't have had anyone die in it."

"That's 'cause I'm talking about them haunting the Kanemasa property. Or, that house was rebuilt? Then it had to have been where it was built before. Something that happened then."

'Is that right', thought Kaori, not satisfied with that. That something unfortunate happened in a house and the ghosts of the dead haunted it was a common enough story. She'd even heard ghost stories about their inhabitants being afraid and tearing down the building, then building up a new one only for them to come out again after all. But.

"If the house moved too would the ghosts move with it? It sounds fishy."

As if his fervor had been sliced down, Akira put his chin in his hands.

"You argue about the weirdest things. But I'm telling you they come out. There're people who've seen it, so that's how it is."

"Didn't they just misunderstand what they saw?"

"They said it's definitely true. And there's more, from inside the wall there was a groaning voice, one guy said he heard it. From inside the fenced in part was a grating, scratching sound, and someone groaning, they said."

Kaori's brows knitted. She didn't like these kinds of stories. "That's just a rumor, I'm sure."

"That might be the case, sure. ---That's why we should go check it out!"

"Don't want to! It's creepy." Kaori gathered the half uneaten breakfast into her rice bowl. "As for me, I don't like that house. It's old and gloomy, it feels strange."

She went to put her bowl in the sink, Akira following her.

"That's why it's great! It's like it's gotta have a story. ---It'll be all right. It's the middle of the day, nothing that scary'll happen."

"Then there's no point in going either is there? If you want to go, why don't you go by yourself at night, Akira?"

"You were the one saying it was just a rumor, weren't you Kaori? We're just going to check it out and see if it feels like that kind of place or not. If we do that, we might see the people from the house by chance too."

"They haven't moved in yet."

"There was talk of the truck that came wasn't there? C'mon, let's just check it out a little."

Kaori breathed a sigh. Akira wouldn't listen to anything she said. He'd follow her around annoyingly all day until she agreed, she could tell by the look in his eyes.

"We'll take a walk by the front of the house but that's it."

Akira broke into a grin. "Okay!"

Going outside, the heat assaulted them from every direction. Going to the dog house by the back door, Love had half of his body in the hole he had dug in there, looking exhausted. Even when Kaori pulled out the leash, he turned away. Love was a mutt with some long haired breed, and chubby. That only seemed to make him feel hotter.

"Look, Love doesn't want to go either," Kaori tried to say but Akira paid it no mind hooking the leash to his collar. As if to say there was no choice, he was going to be drug along, Love lifted his backside. Dejected, Kaori followed after.

The road was baked white and a heat haze shimmered off of it. Akira triumphantly started forward as if chasing after a mirage. The fields were green, and the voices of the cicadas raining down were hot in her ears. Maybe because the asphalt was hot, Love chose to walk in the roadside bushes as he followed Akira.

Kaori's house was in Shita-Sotoba, so it was some distance to the Kanemasa house. There was at least the shade of the trees on a path that came out from the base of Sue no Yama, End Mountain at the west end of the village, so they took an unnecessarily roundabout path. At the foot of the mountains indeed the wind blowing through the firs was pleasingly cool, but with the voices of the cicadas all that much louder, it felt unnecessarily, increasingly hot to her. As she was beginning to regret being drug along by Akira, they came to the

intersection of Sue no Yama and the western mountains. A hokora stood on the path that ran along the western mountains.

"Huh?"

Akira who had been leading the way stopped. When she asked what it was, he pointed to the hokora.

"Kaori, look."

Kaori and Love peered into the hokora where Akira pointed. Due to the sun shining blindingly off of the asphalt, the inside of the hokora was at first dim.

In that small hokora, three adults could fit inside though they'd be cramped. In the fenced in interior were an old stone pillar, so worn down it was hard to tell what it was besides a stone, and an offering box. ---No, that was what should have been in there.

"No... What happened here?"

The stone that should have been standing there prominently was thrown back on a bed of concrete. There were many things broken and scattered inside. The stone that should have been in the center was broken in the middle, its offering box smashed, coins scattered on the floor.

"This is Koushin-sama right?"

"Nn," Kaori nodded. At the very least, with the coins still scattered about, it probably wasn't a thief after the offerings. In the first place, more than looking like the tumulus was destroyed in an attempt to break the offertory box, it was more like the goal was to smash up whatever could be reached within.

"This's bad, man. It's all busted up."

Kaori shrunk back a bit. Ever since she was little, she was taught not to play around in hokoras or tumuli. She was told if she did something bad she would be punished. So, seeing such a sight, she had the feeling something that must never happen had happened.

"Say... Akira, let's go back."

Akira turned with a shocked look, asking why.

"It'd be better to tell someone! About this."

For some reason or other, she couldn't leave it like this. What little drive she had to take off in this heat for a long walk was completely whittled away.

Akira stubbornly looked off towards the north of the western mountains but maybe it was still weighing on his mind, because with an obedient nod he tugged on the leash.

"We're going back, Love. We'll scout it out next time."

"Listen to this, Tatsu-san."

Takemura Tatsu was tending to the store, feeling listless when Yaeko and Takeko came hurrying up. They eagerly beckoned her closer with a hand motion.

Tatsu was making use of the fan, turning an indifferent eye towards them. Yaeko and Takeko came rushing off of the baked village road into the shop.

"Have you seen it?"

"Have I seen what?"

"The Jizo statue there!" Yaeko pointed towards the Third Bridge. "His head has fallen off, his head!"

Tatsu scowled, narrowing her eyes against the sun's rays as she set her gaze towards the bridge. What she saw was Oitarou leaning over and inspecting the inside of the small hokora.

"Across the bridge, we met Oitarou-san. Why, he said the hokora at Mizuguchi is broken too. Smashed all to bits. We were just talking about what a bad sign it was, so imagine our surprise when we crossed the bridge. The Jizo's head had fallen off!"

"Oh?" Tatsu murmured. So that was what the fuss was this morning, she thought. When she woke up and looked outside that morning, she had seen a number of old people gathered near the bridge. Tatsu herself didn't have the laudable habit of going to the hokora first thing in the morning but a group of the elderly in the neighborhood would wake up and head straight to the hokora to put their hands together and clean it up. One of them must have seen it and

called for the others.

"At any rate, it looks like it was broken sometime at night. All about the head and shoulders is just a mess. Now who could do such a sinful act!"

"Really, who!" said Takeko with an exaggerated grimace. "It's a terrible story! Perhaps it was Ohkawa's son, he's committed a few juvenile, rowdy crimes of that nature and all."

Might have been, Tatsu thought. What would even be the purpose in destroying an old worn out Jizo like that? Of course it was probably destruction for its own sake but she didn't think there was anyone who would sink so low as to destroy that.

As she thought this, Ikumi's face appeared in the shop front. Yaeko snapped up from her stool, voice ringing out.

"Listen Ikumi-san, you, have you seen?"

Ikumi gave a thin laugh. "I know all about it. Mizuguchi too, right?"

"Right. Mizuguchi too. And Kami and Shita, both of them."

Takeko voiced her surprise. "Both of them? The one by Second Bridge and the one furthest down, both of them?"

"Right. This morning I found the one in Shita. After all, it's our own neighborhood. It bothered me so I did a full lap of the neighborhood. Second Bridge's hokora was desecrated, and the one across First Bridge on the coast's Koubou-sama was desecrated too. Kami-Sotoba's furthest one north as well."

Both Yaeko and Takeko's jaws dropped.

"Why... then, all of them along Mizuguchi and the village road?"

"So it seems. Might there be others beyond even that desecrated, I wonder?" Sounding somehow triumphant, Ikumi lowered herself onto one of the folding stools.

"They protect the village, you know. Something wicked's going to happen, here soon." Ikumi said with a thin smile. "You can bet on it. This summer will be inauspicious one."

Shimizu Megumi walked down the road that the sun's light began to slope towards.

Weaving between the rows of houses and fields she headed north. Just as she passed the bridge over the small brook, she'd had a run in with an old woman she'd known in passing. "Oh my, Megumi-chan, aren't you gussied up. Are you going out?"

"Eh," Megumi dodged. She didn't even want to talk with the elderly.

"You've gotten so big. You're already in high school? You've really come into your own as a young lady."

Megumi thought to snap back that she'd heard that line the last time they talked, but it never left her lips. If you made any kind of talk with them they'd never let you go. She'd learned that much.

"Oh, say, say," the old woman said, being cut off by Megumi insisting she was in a hurry and leaving. Whatever it was, it was probably just about the Koushin hokora anyway. There were already two old people who had brought that story up to her since she'd left the house.

It seemed the tumuli and stone monuments here and there in the village were broken last night. The deeply superstitious elderly fussed about it like a crime had been committed but, Megumi couldn't help thinking 'Isn't it just a bunch of rocks?' The bigger oddity was that people nowadays still cleaned and made offerings at them.

(How dumb....)

Megumi mumbled as she hurried ahead. Going from road to road, her goal being north, she walked, drawing nearer and nearer to the western mountains. When she entered the Monzen community, she was at the edge of the western mountains.

Megumi came to the corner turn in the street and looped up the slope that lead up the western mountain. The mansion looked like it came out of a foreign movie. The road from where Megumi stood was a slow rising slope, a slightly elevated ridge that wrapped around to the back of the lumberyard mill in Monzen, but from Megumi's position a private road that continued to the

house could be seen. At the end of the leisurely rising road was a somewhat diagonally closed gate. The doors of the gate were made with antique wood, with black metal finish. Were the gate posts brick? The reddish hue was fresh, and the white fence that enclosed was radiantly new. Atop the tall fence were pointed iron rods.

From where Megumi stood, all that could be seen were the fence, those freshly placed, delicate seeming spearheads, and the roof. Blackened grey stones made up the wall that had a similarly darkened window frame and a door crammed in. The entryway was to the right, and a little further in on the left hand side was a complicated bay window jutting out.

But still, that was all she knew. From the start, the construction site had been surrounded by a tall fence, and while there were places along the outer wall where one could peek, Megumi had no way of knowing what the inside was like. What kind of rooms did it have, what kind of interior design, they were all things she really wanted to know, she thought.

Since June when it had finished until this very day, there was no talk of the owners making to move in. Just when would the master show himself? Even though she'd been waiting for so long for them!

(I'd like to see the inside of the house.)

What kind of rooms would it have? What kind of furniture, and what style of curtains and carpet furnished it? She bet there were paintings on the wall, weren't there? Flowers arranged in flower vases, she assumed.

(I wonder what sort of people live here?)

Did they have a daughter Megumi's age? If they did, she wanted to become friends. What would her room be like? At the least, it would have to be western style to fit in, with large, superb furniture and a plush bed in the corner, three layers of box springs high, it was sure to be completely different from Megumi's room. There would be precisely crafted furniture and patterned, lush carpets, an adult looking desk and dressers, and if she could be allowed to peek through her closet she was sure it would be so much fun.

(I wonder if they have a boy.)

A boy just a little older would be so great---- as she thought that, embarrassment hit her. In the desk she'd used since primary school, hidden in the depths of a pull out drawer was a photograph. It wasn't like she'd confessed to him or anything like that yet but hiding that photo while thinking of the boy who resided in the mansion made her feel guilty towards the one in the photo.

But yes, if he could be like a kind older brother! The only child Megumi had always wanted an older brother. What she especially wanted was a gallant one. One who could be her confidant, who could do anything, who she could brag to anyone about, an older brother to be the envy of all the girls in her class. How about if she got along well with the boy from that house and was able to go to his room, being like his little sister? ---But he definitely couldn't come into her room. Everything everywhere and anywhere would be dyed with a warm brewed scent, in such a home.

(May they have high school aged children.)

How many times had Megumi said such a prayer since last year when construction began? If they didn't have children, they were sure to be stately old people living there who would spoil her like a grandchild, or alternately a middle aged couple who could treat her as a daughter would be fine too.

(I want in that house.)

If only she could be intimately invited into that home and to be familiar every nook and cranny of it as if it were her own.

(Why can't I be a child of that house?)

Even though it'd be so great if she could. Not the child of a stiff father, not the child of a nagging mother, not the grand child of old grandparents who griped from sun up to sun down.

(I want to go there.)

Megumi started up the slope as if being drawn by something. After only five meters, her feet stopped their ascent. As she would only feel more pitiful if she went any further, and so she couldn't go any closer. She stared up at that unbearable house, where the gate stood in her way, tightly shut as if to reject Megumi.

"Take a good look, here," Ohkawa Tomio showed to customers on each side of the counter.

The Ohkawa liquor shop had a short counter. On the register side there were some chairs so that customers could sample drinks but it ended up becoming a perch for more general drinking. Ohkawa showed his scabbed arms to the group who had gathered seeking pre-dinner drinks. They were the remnants of the injury from day before when an outsider's car drug him along and flung him into a barrel roll.

"Damn, what a son of a bitch," one customer sympathized with a nod. "If it was outsider driving around a luxury car, then we know nothing good's going to come from them. You don't think he's one of them Kanemasa newcomers, do ya?"

"Who knows? Takami-san didn't think so but. Anyway, that's how it all ends. I don't remember his plates, and no one's seeing them around now."

"There's a chance, maybe it was the same guy." An old man with his face flushed red with liquor said. "You know, the Buddhist statue broke by First Bridge last night."

"What?" Ohkawa's eyes flared widely open. "What an abomination! The only ones who'd do that would be outsiders. Outsiders don't got no respect for those kinds of things at all!"

Many customers wholly agreed but there was a customer who had said "I wonder." That old man quietly eyed the one organizing the shelves, Ohkawa's son.

"Don't think it was him do you?"

At the customer's coarse tone, Ohkawa Atsushi looked up.

"Might've snapped and broke them all up, don'tcha think?"

"Trying to swipe the offerings, probably," said one customer laughing at Atsushi. "He's had a sticky fingered habit all his life."

A conspicuous rotten expression rose on Atsushi's acne-scarred face. He made eyes at the customers, then turned away.

"What's with that attitude?" said Ohkawa. "Don't you get cheeky. Don't think you can be cocky like that just 'cause you've grown big."

Atsushi said nothing, eyeing the shelves. He roughly crammed the canned snacks into place on the shelf, then took the empty cardboard box in hand and stood.

"Oi, Atsushi. Do a neater job of that!"

"I did it," Atsushi answered shortly, taking the box and leaving the store. Behind him he heard Ohkawa grumbling to the customers that in twenty years he'd never been satisfied with how the shelves were sorted.

"The high school passed him out of pity too from the looks of it. Even if he kept going he wouldn't get nowhere with it. He's old enough now but don't got no brains for nothing but trying to act tough. How'd I end up having such a good for nothing brat?"

Atsushi went around to the back side of the shop, throwing out the empty box. He stomped it down with all his might then slapped it onto the mountain of boxes.

Fuck you, Atsushi spat out in his thoughts, leaving from the back of the shop. Like he knew anything about any old stone statues. When he was a kid it was true he'd stolen from the offertory boxes but in the present he wouldn't be happy about the five or ten yen out of an offertory box. They kept dragging out stories from when he was a kid, and he didn't like how they could just write it off as his fault somehow.

Taking the road by the shop, he came out in the shopping district but he didn't really have any place to go. At times like this he was sure running wild in a car or a motorcycle would be just the thing to refresh him but Atsushi had neither a bike nor a car. In high school he had friends who would loan him theirs, but once he graduated and was sucked into the village, his ties were cut. The shop's car and bike's keys were under his parents watch. His mother who was stingy in all she did was cautious about Atsushi wasting gas and refused to hand over the key unless it was for a delivery. If he had his own money it'd be great but Atsushi was made to work in the shop all day without receiving any kind of salary. His parents told him that since they paid a little to feed him of

course he'd be expected to help out in the store.

Atsushi didn't like how they said that about everything. He didn't have anywhere to go or a way to get there, to hang out and fix his sour mood. Not having even one car at his age was so pathetic he couldn't face his friends. He could go by bus or ask them to come pick him up but he couldn't get on board with exposing what a failure he was. By the time he knew it, he was cooped up in these mountains, unable to get out. The elderly were always keeping an eye on him to pull off the mischief he got into as a child, and people his own age drew a line between themselves and him. His parents and younger brother were there but he was the black sheep of the family, and they all looked down on him.

He didn't like it, it wasn't fun, anything and everything was making him mad. Atsushi stormed down the street with all the anger smashing down on the soles of his feet. Stomping around aimlessly, by the time he noticed evening was falling, he'd ended up at the base of the western mountain.

The heat was steaming and the cicadas' voices sounded in the twilight. The villagers were all hurrying to their homes, not a one sparing him a second glance.

---Like he cared. If anyone called out to Atsushi, it'd just be some old person acting like they were so high and mighty in talking to him. Don't just loiter around, your parents are going to worry, stop sponging off your parents and pull yourself together, follow your little brother's example why don't you, he imagined they'd say to him. If not that, they'd act like they were interrogating him for a crime, unabashedly harassing him.

(Bastards making a fool outtah me...)

Atsushi was at times seized by the need to race through the village like a hurricane, to cast away from the place. But, why would Atsushi leave the village like that? If he disappeared, it'd be even better for the village than for him. Atsushi spat at the side of the road, as if trying to spit out something bitter, but that bitterness clung to the inside of his chest, in the back of his mouth, unable to be released.

Just a ways ahead was the pathway that lead up the western mountain. The

slope went towards Kanemasa. There wasn't any special meaning in climbing it but halfway up the hill taking in the sight of that majestic mansion, an unexpected, new thought arose from Atsushi's chest.

It was a mansion built before the summer, its inhabitants having not yet appeared. There were rumors that they'd moved in, and stories about seeing people's shadows and hearing voices but it seemed like the truth was indeed that nobody was there. The house built by outsiders. There was something solemn to it, different from the village. It carved itself into the village to look down at them---to look down on Atsushi.

Atsushi stood before that firmly sealed gate. The mansion stood creepily against the madder red sky, naturally devoid the presence of people. Atsushi casually surveyed the surroundings. Of course, there was no sign of anyone.

Nobody's here. ----Nobody's looking.

From there, Atsushi looked up at the affecting gates.

(Nobody would know if I snuck in.)

He put a hand on the wooden gate about body height, eyes shifting side to side.

He could go into the grounds, into the mansion itself. Even if he smashed in a window and smeared mud all over the inside, nobody was watching to know it was Atsushi's handiwork. On the contrary, because nobody lived there, if something like that were done, it would happen without anybody knowing it even happened. He didn't know if the owner would move in, but as soon as they did, they'd see the inside of their home laid to waste.

(Not a bad idea.)

Atsushi's mouth warped into a smile. Those bastards moving in would sure be surprised. They built up an exaggerated mansion like this, planning on looking down on the villagers but, this cheeky little snot would literally be slinging mud at them, and just thinking about it made some of his built up frustrations lift.

"Alright," he lightly voiced before clambering over the gate. Leaving footprints on the newly painted tawny gates and the brand new black metal fixtures was fun. He went up the gate with a deliberate kick. Twilight fell on the broad

courtyard, and in that isolation a desolate feeling arose. He jumped down into that isolation. Without knowing who the target was, he thought 'serves you right.'

Where to sneak in from---thought Atsushi as he looked up. The wall had a pretentious stone pattern, and there was a window to the right of the massive and intimidating front of the building. Curtains were smartly hung, and through a small crack in them, peaked the darkness coiled within.

'Should I break the glass there to get in?' he thought. The window had a thin frame in a shape he couldn't get through even if he'd broken the glass and, in the first place, that was boring, he now thought.

He didn't want to do something that flashy. He should infiltrate more stealthily. If he did, the people moving in wouldn't notice until they entered their fine house that the inside that was all laid to waste.

With a thin smile Atsushi followed the outer wall around towards the back. Atsushi didn't know specifics but it was definitely an extravagant building. The walls were certainly dignified, and the roof was high. The aged stone walls precisely closed in an enormous amount of space. Within them was sure to lurk that darkness seen before through the crevices in the curtains.

Passing around the front to turn the corner to the side, he came into the building's shadow. Right at the side was a thin path wedged between the building and another building that appeared to be a garage. Its brand new white coated shutter was drawn.

Atsushi looked about his surroundings, confirming that he was completely surrounded by the wall and the building, removed from the outside view. He kicked those shutters twice, three times. The scream let out by the metal reverberated through the garage, against the nearby outer wall, a startlingly loud echo. Without thinking he cowered. Too much noise made him unsettled.

(No one's here...)

Or no one should have been. The building was isolated in the western mountains with no neighbors. No matter how much of a riot he raised, it shouldn't have reached anyone's ears. Even knowing as much, he couldn't help looking around. Feeling like any minute now someone would demand to know

who was there, Atsushi was a little afraid. He'd intended to kick the shutter enough to dent it but seeing a scratch was good enough. ---Right, his goal was to infiltrate the inside of the building.

Between the house and the garage wound a very narrow pathway. It was already cloaked in a thin darkness making it so that he couldn't see it clearly. It appeared to be a dead end but at the end there might have been a door or a window facing the pathway. Keeping his eyes on his surroundings, Atsushi stepped onto that dimly lit path looking for a route further back, for a way in as he walked.

There were fewer openings than he'd have thought. There was one window facing the road but it was about Atsushi's height and closed with a wooden door. There was no place to get his footing and it didn't look like he could get in through there. At the end of the pathway was nothing more than a wall in his way. It was just a pathway connecting the garage to the building. Atsushi clicked his tongue. As he turned to go back, his body stiffened faintly.

Suddenly, there was someone behind him, he could feel it. Why he felt that way, he himself didn't know. He was there, deep between the darkness of the stone wall and the garage in that narrow alleyway. Someone was behind him, watching him from behind. He had a premonition of someone standing in his way at the entrance of that pathway.

(No way...)

That shouldn't have been. Nobody lived here yet. Atsushi gradually looked behind himself. He saw beyond the dark pathway to the garden bathed in the remaining afterglow of twilight. Of course, between Atsushi and the entrance, there was no hint of anyone to be seen.

Just as he was going back along the path, thinking that it was his imagination and embarrassed at his own mistake, at the halfway point, again, Atsushi stopped. This time, from the depths of the alleyway instead of at the entrance, he felt a gaze. It was from where he had just walked away from, behind him, no---just above him.

With a start Atsushi looked up. Above the melancholy hue of the outer wall was one second story window. Outside of the glass was not a wooden door but

an iron lattice of bars in place.

This is bad, he realized. No one should have been there, yet he had the feeling that he was being watched from someone. That window. Someone was there looking down at him.

They had moved in, there were rumors about it. Maybe without anybody knowing, the master had been able to move in.

No---Though Atsushi. He'd heard an even stranger rumor. Here there was a master here who should not have been, it said. It was a ghost story for children.

(Couldn't be.)

Even while thinking as much his feet sped up. He came off of the pathway into the garden but he still couldn't fight the feel of being watched. Atsushi looked up at the house. That house with a strangely intimidating aura, that dark house.

As he thought about what an unsettling feeling he had, just then, from the end of that pathway he'd just come out of, he thought he heard something. A sound like somebody stepping on the gravel spread out in that alleyway.

That shouldn't have been, there was no door out to the pathway. It was certain there was nobody there. But he felt someone's footsteps were creeping, that someone was coming closer.

Atsushi raced back to the gate. He left a scuff on the garage; he'd call that enough for the day. Looking behind himself so many times, he climbed over the gate. The surrounding mountains he looked over were covered in the forest of firs, the deep shadows of those trees beckoning the night to fall on the village that much more quickly.

Jumping off of the gate, Atsushi ran down the hill. That was when, at the sides of the hill, from within the underbrush summoning down the evening, he heard a rustling sound. He turned away from the source of the sound, hurrying his legs faster. It was clearly rushing after Atsushi. As Atsushi went from a jogging pace to an all-out run, it followed after him into the village.

Atsushi, without any concern for the way he flailed as he ran, rushed down the slope. He came to a corner when the sound cutting through the underbrush ceased. As he looked back at that, after what seemed to be a moment of

hesitation, he returned to the slope above where the sound had been heard. In the undergrowth, he thought he'd seen a glimpse of what looked like dog hair.

(A dog....?)

Atsushi sighed. Come to think of it, he'd heard there were a lot of stray dogs about recently. That's all, he thought, relieved, only to immediately become angry with his own relief. It was a blessing that no one was looking. But to be scared of a dog and change his mind to run away! While he'd finally managed to sneak onto the grounds, he ran back only leaving a mark on the shutters.

He couldn't contain his frustration with himself, who would do such a thing. It was disgusting, that he was the type to let himself take such a bumbling action. He hated it all. --That slope, that house too, really, just every last thing.

The children's playground was a confined space. It was the riverbed of the mountain stream; the Shinto shrine was on the opposite side of the bridge, the place of the Otabisho where the gods' palanquins resided during festivals, that place in the shade of the fir trees.

Yuusuke crossed the bridge in front of his house, going towards the Shinto shrine. As the sun set, the shrine grounds were abandoned. He knew that nobody was there. At the corner of his house was the bridge, and he'd seen the children return from the shrine across it. He was crouched with his newly bought miniature car but nobody paid him any attention or called out to Yuusuke.

Katou Yuusuke was the neighborhood's only first grader. The oldest of the children younger than him was Makoto, three years old, and there were a group of three third grade students who were the closest to his age out of those who were older. He'd been born in an area without many kids. So Yuusuke was alone. The kids younger than Yuusuke each had their own playmates. He'd seen them coming and going across the bridge with a ball and bat looking happy about something and while it seemed like there might have been something really fun over there, the shrine was just a shrine.

Still gripping his miniature car, Yuusuke stood in the shrine's archway. In that wide open space was the closed main hall and the open Kagura hall. One building had its doors firmly shut as if tightly holding something inside; the

other building, in contrast, was wide open, a gaping space without walls. In the corners were small Inari harvest gods, withered banners, and the sacred trees, dark and condescending.

He came to this Shinto shrine often. His grandmother Yukie brought him every morning to clean. Being at the shrine in the mornings was, to Yuusuke, like being in another's tatami room. There was nothing there, but it seemed there was, and it made him feel prickly. At midday, the shrine was like another's tea room or kitchen. It was a place Yuusuke couldn't enter, a place it disappointed him a bit not to be able to enter.

"House sitting."

Yuusuke looked over the shrine after the sun had set and summed it up thusly. Being at the shrine at dusk was like house sitting. Full of empty crevices and corners he knew well, it still seemed like an unfamiliar place. There were recently many people here due to the festival, so it only felt all the more like that.

Yuusuke set his mini car down and in exchange picked up a stone. He tried to do like the older kids and throw the stone over the top of the shrine arch but it wasn't even a little bit fun. Why were those kids in such high spirits? Realizing the car was better than the rock, he gripped it tightly. But with that said, it wasn't as if it'd be more fun because he was gripping a model car either.

He kicked a stone a little ways, and it rolled into the darkness of the thicket. Suddenly the wind blew and the branches creaked. The cicadas could be heard crying as if they were jumping to their feet in surprise by something.

This wasn't any fun. It was a creepy place.

Yuusuke retreated. Even with that said, going home like this gave him the feeling that he was overlooking the most fun place. Though of course there wouldn't be anything fun there, because there was nobody else there.

While caught up in his worries, he compared what he could see of the darkness of the trees shadows with the bridge beyond it. At the front of that bridge was a storefront with a light. That electronics shop was Yuusuke's house. His father was always busy with something called 'deliveries' and 'construction' and going off in his car, and his grandmother tended to the shop. Yuusuke went

to school, came home, and played alone. Yuusuke had no mother. He'd seen pictures and had seen the gravestone and grave for one called his mother but he'd never actually, practically had one. His father said that she died when Yuusuke was young. As for what it meant to die, Yuusuke didn't really know. He thought that it was probably akin to being captured by one of the Oni that crept down from the mountains.

'Oni', he thought with a fright. He mustn't be out walking once the sun had gone down. Even if his father was late with a 'delivery', so dinner would be a ways off, even if his grandmother was in the kitchen so it would mean having to watch TV all by himself, he had to be in the house by dark. Because the Oni would come.

Gripping the miniature car, prepared to throw it as soon as an Oni appeared, he gradually stepped back. Once he was under the shrine archway, he pivoted about towards the bridge and dashed. Once halfway across the bridge, he saw the light beyond the pane of glass in the shop, so he stopped. He looked above his house where he saw the light shining. On the western mountains, a black shadow stretched out.

(I know the truth.) Yuusuke totteringly crossed the rest of the bridge. (That's where the Oni are.)

Granny may have said that they came from the grave but obviously even an Oni wouldn't want to be in the ground. So they were in that creepy house. They hid in there and waited for the night. And that was where they brought everyone. That was obvious.

Because he was catching his breath, he surely wouldn't miss what happened on the mountain slope he was looking up at, one small light flickering on, which Yuusuke did not overlook. Much further west than the mountain temple, and in a place higher than the Ozaki Clinic or the lights shining from the row of houses in Monzen, it was there.

(There...)

Before Yuusuke's very eyes as he watched, two, three times it flickered, then that light disappeared.

Yuusuke thought that it was a sign of something scary. He nervously crossed

the riverbank roadway and then took off running back to the shop.

Part 4

"Oh my, welcome."

As Seishin stepped into the book shop, Tashiro Rumi was standing at the register. The window facing the outside was flooded with the sun's rays but inside the shop the air conditioner was running. Seishin wiped his sweat with relief.

"Good day. I'd gotten a call from Masa-san that the book I'd requested had come in?"

"Just a min, if you please." Rumi said to Seishin, as she searched the depths of the register's shelves. On the shelves he could see several volumes with medical titles. They must have been Toshio's order.

The only book shop in the village was this, the Tashiro Bookstore, managed by Mr. and Mrs. Tashiro. While it wasn't hard to find a store with newspapers or magazines in the corner, there were no other shops that specialized in books. Formerly, when it was in Monzen or Gate Front, it was literally in front of the mountain gate and handled the sutra texts and drawings but when the predecessor moved to the outskirts of the shopping district, he opened shop as a book store. It was once a very small home used as a shopfront but, the household portion was demolished and the shop expanded to add more shelves about ten years ago, when the predecessor's son Masaki's time came. Tashiro Masaki was two grades ahead of Seishin, and had gone to the same school as him from primary through highschool.

"Is this it I wonder? I'm sorry, Papa went out to warm the seats at the cafe." Rumi took out a pack of books bound by a single rubber band. She eyed the memo note stuck to the bundle and nodded once. "This is it. ---It looks like two volumes haven't come in yet. There is no literary agent for them, so we'll try contacting the publisher."

"Sorry for the trouble."

Rumi smiled and gathered the books into a paper bag. As she was passing by back to the register either looking over or seeking something on the shelves, there was the sound of the door opening and a cheerful voice wafting in a "Hello!" along with the hot air.

"Boy, sure is hot out there." It was neighborhood resident Takami. His house was catty corner from the Tashiro Bookstore. "I thought I saw the Junior Monk come in here."

"It really is hot, yes."

Rumi bowed her head to Takami. Takami returned the bow while saying: "Junior Monk, have you heard?"

"About what?"

"Well, there's more talk about the Benz, but."

"My," Rumi said, her hands stopping. "Is this about Maeda-san, that car that threw her Shigeki-kun off of his bike? Come to think of it, the Junior Monk just happened to have been there!"

Tashiro Rumi's own home was currently in the same neighborhood as the Maeda household, Kami Sotoba.

"Yes."

"The missus of the Maeda house is neurotic. Ever since that she's just been so tense. She even goes to radio exercises with him."

"Oh boy," Takami said, shocked. Rumi gave a smile mixed with a sigh.

"It's not that I can't understand how she feels. The highway is nearby. I tell my children not to go near the highway too but, children want to go where you tell them not to. What's worse, across the highway is the Horie Auto lot, yes? They've been told it's dangerous over there but I've spied kids over there countless times."

Horie Auto was an automobile repair shop. Behind the garage was a rather spacious lot for decommissioned vehicles. It was a source of many of the village's parental headaches. To the kids, there was no other place to play. But

that 'playground' was dangerous, and there was no way to get to it other than to cross the highway.

"There's a crosswalk and a stop light there, though. Why do those folks from out of town always overlook that."

"Really. The PTA had just met and someone brought up, how about a pedestrian bridge? But I wonder if they'd even use it if there were."

"Exactly. And a pedestrian bridge would be hard on the elderly too."

The ones to meet with misfortune on the highway were primarily children and the elderly. Takami gave a grieving sigh, then as if remembering, looked to Seishin. "Right, so, about that car again, there was a big debacle."

"What happened?"

"Yeah, that night someone said that they saw it. The Ohtsuka Sawmill's son."

"At night, you say?"

"Yes. It was at a pretty late hour, when it seems he met with a dark Benz driving down the village road, leaving the village. Seems he was still up to his usual dangerous driving habits. That was around eleven at night, he said. That guy, I wonder just where in the village he was up 'till then." Takami said with an exaggerated sigh. "On our end, we were sure that he was a hit and run with that child, so we were thinking he had left town and was hiding out out there somewhere. We think that, then he hides himself somewhere in the village and then brazenly leaves by the main village road. Just think, we really should have stationed a watch at the entrance to the village and looked around here and there a little more, huh?"

"While you say it hid, that car would stand out anywhere it stopped."

The rumor that a car had hit a child should have spread through the village in a flash. With that said, even if it was called a village, in all reality it covered a rather large area. So while surely not all of the people would know about it after all, it was certain that a large number of them did, and they would have been looking out for an unfamiliar car.

"That's exactly right," said Takami, his voice going low. "That's why, you know,

there's been talk that it must have been the Kanemasa's car."

"It couldn't be."

"Yeah, but really can you think of anything else? Until it left the village, nobody had laid eyes on her! The electronics shop's Katou-san--Yukie-san from there saw it fleeing up the village road but, after that, nothing. And the electronics shop's right at the Ichino bridge."

Ah, Seishin nodded. Ichino bridge was quite far north, so the problem car was going either towards Kami Sotoba and if not that then towards Monzen. ---But, once it had gone north, it could drive around from there, so it wasn't necessarily limited to those places, not really.

(No) thought Seishin. (Kami Sotoba or Monzen--if neither, possibly Yamairi.)

North of the village, on another side of the northern mountain was that community of sparse plots of land.

"Kanemasa is in Monzen, isn't it. So we were thinking it might have gone to the Kanemasa mansion. If it went in behind the wall and closed the gates, they wouldn't catch the village folk's sights, would they? And then they hid out there until all signs of life had petered out."

"Is there not also Yamairi?"

Impossible, Takami waved off. "There's nothing but three old folks up there. If he went there, he'd definitely stand out."

"But Kanemasa is set out to the west of Monzen. If you're saying he went to Kanemasa, he would have to cross through Monzen but in doing that, don't you think he would be sure to be seen by somebody?"

"Ah, that's right. There's that too," Takami tilted his head. "Just in case, it'd be better to ask the old folks in Yamairi about it, then."

"Mightn't it have been Kanemasa?" The one who added such to the conversation was Rumi. "It's just so creepy, that house. It's, how to put it, suspicious."

"Right." Takami nodded in agreement. "Yeah, Katou-san's squirt---Yuusuke-kun, was it? That kid, he was tending to the shop with his grandma and saw the

car, he's saying it went to Kanemasa. Now, he wasn't saying he saw it go to Kanemasa of course, but he said that's definitely where it went."

Takami forced a smile.

"Somehow Yuusuke-kun seems to think of that house on Kanemasa to be a haunted mansion or a villain's hide-out. So, if it's a car driven by a bad guy, of course he'll say it was Kanemasa, but that's a child's thinking."

"I see," Seishin and Rumi smiled.

"But among the kids, there seems to be a strange story. That they've seen people near Kanemasa or heard strange voices or something."

"Ah," Rumi rose her voice. "That's right. Our child had been talking about it, about that. About seeing a person going up the Kanemasa hill at night or about a person seen through the window even though there shouldn't be anyone there."

"Right," Takami nodded. "I'm not sure what I think of taking kid's gossip too seriously, though. But adults are saying it too, like--they've seen light through the storm shutters or there are people saying they've heard sounds from within the walls."

"Wasn't it their imagination, or some sort of mistake?" Seishin asked, causing Takami to tilt his head.

"I wonder, huh?"

"At any rate, it's been built a long time and left uninhabited, and on top of that, having the strange style that building does, it can't help becoming the topic of ghost stories. If someone were really coming and going, there wouldn't be such vague stories, there would be more specific ones going around."

Takami tilted his head, deep in thought. Seishin went on.

"Perhaps from the outside it appears finished but inside there's still some construction that needs to be done, so people are coming and going. If it were the owner, they probably wouldn't come and go so stealthily."

"About that, since they hit a kid like that, maybe there's no choice but to be stealthy like that?"

"In that case, I'd imagine they wouldn't come by at all until things had cooled off. I do think it's just a ghost story, myself, but."

"Maybe so," Takami said, but he didn't seem satisfied with that explanation.

Rumi breathed a sigh.

"Either way, if they would just hurry up and move on in for us, it'd be a weight off of everyone's shoulders, already."

Part 5

""Fuki-san, good evening."

Yano Tae directed at the person in the brightly lit living room, carrying a small bowl in hand. Gotouda Fuki turned around as if surprised.

"Oh my, it's Tae-chan," she said as she went out towards the veranda. The reason her feet drug as she walked was because Fuki suffered from arthritis. She opened the screen door and with a light grimace, she knelt.

"I made too much of this side dish. I thought you might like some, Fuki-san."

"Thank you so much, as always."

"My daughter has dinner at the shop, so I'm alone, you know. But, it's hard to only make enough for one, isn't it? But even so, I don't feel like going to the shop and eating something greasy."

"Once you get old, western style food is just..." Fuki said, gratefully receiving the offered bowl. With her hand on her knee, she stood, though it appeared to be a struggle. "Well, do come in and sit down."

Watching as Fuki drug her feet along into the house, Tae took a seat on the veranda. The living room was quiet and still. How unusual that the television wasn't on. There was no sign of Fuki's son Shuuji.

He'd gone out somewhere then, had he? How unusual. Shuuji was thirty eight, no, had he turned thirty nine now? He was Fuki's youngest child. He failed to get married and still remained in the home. It seemed he went drinking frequently at the drive-in where her daughter worked but he didn't have any friends to invite to go drinking with him. Kanami said that the counter would become gloomy when Shuuji came to the shop and that he didn't seem well received.

Tae sat on the veranda, thinking about Shuuji's whereabouts. She wasn't that terribly interested. Just, when she peeked into the living room from outside, sitting in the brightly lit room was Fuki all alone. When she saw such a sight, it

was like something got caught in her throat. Just seeing an old person sitting there in isolation made her feel lonely herself. Without a doubt, she whose daughter was away at the shop as she ate alone was seen in the same way, which made it all the more lonesome.

"We're fresh out of everything, so I can't offer anything." Fuki returned with a tray.

"Don't fuss over me," said Tae before moving on. "By the way, Fuki-san, do you know if the people in the Kanemasa house have moved in?"

"I haven't heard anything, but have they moved in?"

"They must have. This morning when I got up to wash my hands, I saw a light on."

"Are you sure you didn't make a mistake?"

"I'm sure. I'd seen it before. I thought then that maybe I was mistaking what I saw so this time I paid good, good attention when I saw it. What I saw was definitely Kanemasa. If it wasn't Kanemasa, then since there aren't any street lights there and such, there isn't anyone else who could be coming and going at night."

"That is certainly true."

"That house, though, there's something creepy about it, isn't there. I'm really without a doubt there was a light on. But, a light being on even when there shouldn't be anyone there, what do you think that's about?"

"Who knows," Fuki returned to Tae who sat on the veranda. She herself recognized it as a curt response. It'd be nice if you recognized that I don't care about this conversation, but, she thought. And if you won't think too poorly of me for it, that would also be good, but.

"Moving here when they have no ties here in itself seems like there should be some pretext. I hope they're not too strange of people, but."

"Uh huh...." Her voice was still curt. As if Tae suddenly realized it, she made a bewildered face.

"It seems I've interrupted something."

Because you have, Fuki hesitated to say back. "Right now, Shuuji is ill in bed."

"Oh my, a summer cold?"

"I don't think that's what it is but, I mean, for someone who's never been sick once to be bedridden, I don't know what to think."

"That's true. I'm so sorry, barging in when you're preoccupied."

"Oh no, nothing of the sort."

"It's fine, please, think nothing of it. Even if it's one summer cold, you're worried and distracted, so be sure to take care."

Fuki nodded and Tae stood. With a 'later', she started down the dusk-lit path.

I wonder if I'd done something wrong, Fuki thought. Tae lived with her daughter Kanami who worked at the drive-in, and Kanami didn't leave the shop until late, so Tae was lonely in her home. She tried to find some reason for coming all the way across the village to visit.

"....Sorry about this, Tae-chan."

With a murmured apology, Fuki turned her gaze to Kanemasa. That slope that was supposed to have a home was nothing but darkness. Turning away as she had no interest, Fuki went back into her living room, past the wide open sliding door to the corridor. "Nee, Shuuji. Tae-chan brought some boiled goods, won't you eat?"

As Fuki called out, she headed deeper down the corridor. She peered into her son's room. With the sliding screen door left open, there was no light on. The smell of the mosquito coil Fuki had lit thinly stagnated.

"Shuuji?"

Fuki's son lied in the futon gazing at the ceiling. His wide open eyes looked as if they were not looking at this world but peering into another one.

Fuki breathed a sigh. Her one and only youngest son was ultimately left in her care. He was fresh on the verge of forty but he had neither a wife nor children. If Tae was all alone with her daughter, Fuki was all alone with her son. That son's condition, ever since he returned from the community north of the village, Yamairi, had been strange.

"Are you all right? You haven't eaten all day."

Fuki placed her hand on her son's forehead but the skin beneath her hand was almost pleasantly cool to the touch. Even that got no reaction from her son. Blinking as if remembering something, he stared at the ceiling.

North of the village, located on the other side of the northern mountain, the community of Yamairi was isolated. It was originally a settlement at the entrance to the mountains but as forestry became obsolete the number of inhabitants dwindled and presently there were no more than three old people living there. One of those elders was Fuki's own older brother. Shuuji went to visit his uncle Hidemasa in Yamairi five days ago, after calling about the time she was thinking of going to bed to say he was going to Yamairi, that son who always went drinking after work.

Fuki thought it was because of the alcohol at first but Shuuji had heard at Chigusa that Hidemasa wasn't doing well, he'd said. It seemed that her sister-in-law Mieko had come down to the village to do some shopping and said as much to him. He said he was worried so he was going to pay him a visit and Fuki herself didn't feel it too necessary to stop him, so she said take care and hung up the phone. He came back much later that night and since then had been like this. The next day he seemed languid but the day after that he was bedridden. He had neither a fever nor a cough. Looking as if his soul had been spirited away, his face pale, he lied there and all day today. Even if Fuki called out to him, he wouldn't even turn to look at her.

"Shuuji, hey."

As expected, no response. Pouring his gaze up into the ceiling, he was heavily muddled.

She thought to call the doctor. Doctor Ozaki, unlike his predecessor, didn't mind house calls. But she wondered if she should really call him.

Fuki's son had been acting strange ever since he had returned from Yamairi while she slept. The next day, when Fuki came to wake him, Fuki found Shuuji's summer bedding sullied. It looked like blood. In surprise she pulled back the futon blanket to see Shuuji sleeping in his clothes, his hand and those clothes stained deep brown and giving off a stench. She quickly examined her sleeping

son's body but he didn't seem to be especially injured.

Even if she asked him what on earth happened, her son didn't give any response. She tried to call her brother to see if he'd known anything but there was no answer. She had a very bad feeling. For some reason her brother and his wife weren't answering the phone and her son was in that condition. If Fuki could drive either a car or a motorcycle, she would by all means to go see how her brother and his wife were doing but---even while thinking that, Fuki understood that it was nothing but an excuse. She couldn't say why, but she was somehow afraid.

"Nee, Shuuji.... Did something happen?"

Fuki asked of him, when he let out a grumbling voice. Shuuji groaned from deep in his throat. It was certain he was giving a response but, what he wanted to say wasn't conveyed.

"----Shuuji?"

But he gave no further response. Shuuji closed his eyes as if in annoyance, and the beginnings of the shallow breath of sleep could be heard. Fuki came to a decision as she stood. If tomorrow he was still like this then tomorrow for sure she would call the Junior Doctor to pay a visit, she thought. Yes, she could just stay quiet about the blood. Surely it had nothing to do with a medical examination.

She returned to the living room through the hallway, thinking 'something might have happened to my son'. The sound of her footsteps followed her every step echoing thoughts that "something did happen." Something---something to stain Shuuji in blood, something to keep her older brother and his wife from answering the phone.

(It couldn't be. What am I thinking?)

She scolded herself but still her unease didn't depart. Her introverted son. Fuki was well familiar with that son's unexpectedly easily enraged side. Furthermore her son and Hidemasa had gotten into a big fight over something at work just the day before. Her son was a mild man but once he'd been drinking, if he snapped, it was bad. Especially towards family.

(What am I thinking? There's no reason to call to mind something like this, no reason at all.)

Fuki hung her head and returned once again to the living room with no trace of any others, where she was for a long while caught in thought.

--The next morning, Fuki looked within the futon to find her son dead.

Chapter 2 Translation Notes

Chapter 2-1

Villages, Towns; Mizobe, annexations, Sotoba vs. Sotoba Village

- Government and addresses in Japan are arranged, from top down: Nation (Japan, the country), Prefecture (47 total), to Municipalities. Think federal, state, county, for Americans.

Municipalities are either designated as cities, towns, or villages based on population, among other factors. Because it cuts down on red tape to pool resources, there is a push for annexation; thus, Sotoba was absorbed into the larger nearby town of Mizobe and should technically not be designated as a *village*

any longer. Cities are generally broken down into wards or towns listed on mailing envelopes, then district, blocks, and house numbers.

While a 'town' can be a direct breakdown of a prefecture, breakdowns of cities are also called towns, as a carry over from the tendency of towns to be built on the outskirts of cities only to be annexed later. The seven portions of Sotoba, Kami-Naka-Monzen, Shimo-Sotoba-Mizuguchi, and Yamairi are translated as neighborhoods or communities.

Chapter 2-3

Koushin-sama

- Something of a lost folksy god derived from blending Buddhism, Shintoism and Taoism, Koushin is a Taoist god who is believed to prevent worms in the body from sneaking out every 60th night and telling higher order gods about people's bad deeds, which would lead to punishment. The three monkeys covering their eyes, mouths and ears represent how he won't allow God or the worms to hear, see or speak of people's evil. He's also a god of agriculture who

blessees harvests and crops on those 60th days. An

[example](#)

of a hokora with Koushin, from hikabekagu.exblog.jp.

Tumulus/Tumuli

- Memorial sites, mounds of dirt or rocks raised up over a grave-site. Often used to commemorate local legends, there are usually markers such as plants or statues or the like. Maintenance of them is considered a good deed and holy work. They vary in size; no image as they're generally just, well, mounds.

Koubou-sama

- Buddhist monk Kukai, founder of the Shingon or "True Word" school of Buddhism One of Japan's most famous holy figures, he was important in literature, religion and government in his day. Was given the title Koubou Daishi after death, Koubou translating as "spreading or teaching Buddhism." and Daishi as "Great Teacher."

[Example](#)

of a Koubou statue.

Shinto Temples

Shinto temples are denoted on maps by the arch gates that mark their entrance, and the general entrance into holy areas. There are no doors on them, they're really more of a flat-topped arch called a torii than a gate.

[Example](#)

of an arch from Wikimedia Commons. Buddhist temples may also have these, but more commonly (or in addition to the arches) have gates Near the entrance is a fountain for purification/hand washing.

The

Kagura Hall

is an open stage originally used for Noh plays and musical offerings to the gods.

[Example](#)

of a Kagura Hall from Flickr.

The

Main Hall

where the shrine god, represented by a statue, mirror or other symbol, resides. It remains consistently closed to the public.

[Example](#)

of a Main Hall from Wikimedia Commons.

As the main hall is off limits to the public, public worship takes place in a

worship hall

. This is where the bell ringing and general worship take place.

Otabisho

- The place where the god's palanquin, or portable shrines, rests during festivals. Usually still on shrine grounds. Gods don't leave their shrines other than during festivals, when they're put in portable shrines and carried about, for example during the Shinkousai for celebration. They may be left out for only one day or for several days, during special celebratory periods.

Inari

- Gods of harvests, usually rice specifically, represented by foxes that tend to serve as Inari's messengers or workers. There are many stories and legends surrounding them, and several different gods that are associated with Inari.

[Example](#)

of an Inari statue with banners.

--I don't remember where this came in but it's in my notes for things to

culture note. I'll just stick it here:

Household/Family Shrines

- Not just limited to roadsides, homes often have Shinto shrines meant to house gods as well. Charms known as Ofuda are stored in them and prayers are said at the house-bound shrine where offerings of food and drink are to be set out. An

[example](#)

of a household shrine from Yosokan Dojo, with the mirror being the object housing the god.

Chapter 3

Part 1

Seishin received notice of the death on July eighth, early on a Saturday morning. Just finished with the morning services, he left the main temple to Ikebe and Tsurumi, going on ahead to the living quarters, just as Mitsuo was stepping out of the temple office.

"Ah, Junior Monk," his voice called out as he half-ran down the corridor, Mitsuo's demeanor indicating there must have been an emergency indeed. "There was a call just now. It seems the Gotouda household's Shuuji-san has passed away."

Seishin blinked. "Shuuji-san? That can't be."

Even if it was a small village, it wasn't as if he knew everybody who lived there but at the very least Seishin knew that Shuuji was a man in good health and not at an age where sudden death was to be expected.

"Was there an accident?"

"Complications from a summer cold, his mother was saying, but. The Koike household's Masaharu-san will come to meet with you as the funeral manager if you have the time."

"I understand. Thank you very much."

Mitsuo nodded and headed into the living quarters hallway towards the main building. Changing places with him, Seishin entered into the temple office. Looking at the blackboard, he could see Mitsuo's solemn writing, "Gotouda, Meeting, Koike."

The village had an institution called the Mourning Crew. The village had no

undertaker. In its place they had the Mourning Crew. Anytime there was a misfortune in a community, the neighbors would get everyone together to help. The women were necessary for the mourner's meal and of course the men's help was indispensable for burying the deceased. The village still buried its dead. Graveyards for each household were established in the mountains that encircled the village, and digging the grave holes there, as well as hoisting the coffins up there and putting the dirt back over them would be impractically hard labor without male hands on board. The Mourning Crew's local representative would serve as a manager on the occasion of a funeral in place of an undertaker, assigning all the other roles. From arranging for a coffin and any related mediation, to everything roughly related to the funeral, he managed it. The elderly of the Koike family had been serving as the heads of the Naka-Sotoba Mourning Crew for some time.

(A summer cold....)

Shuuji was surely only six, maybe seven years older than Seishin, wasn't he? He had come to Buddhist memorial services so he knew his face well, but they weren't what you would call particularly close, by any means. If he recalled, he lived together with his mother. Certainly, his mother Gotouda Fuki must have been despondent.

(It's just, too soon.)

While caught in his melancholy, he headed deeper into the living quarters. He peeked into the living room but didn't see his mother. And so he left the living quarters to the separate building--or as much as one could call it separate when only stepping out a little ways from the main wing of the house--to assist in feeding his father at his bedside. "Good morning," he said, seeing his father for the first time that morning.

This building called a separate one was the single western style building at the temple. His father Shinmei's gaunt body laid on the bed, which he could raise to a half-up position with the electric remote at his bedside. Last year he suffered a stroke and ever since his limbs had been paralyzed. With his age adding to matters, since becoming bedridden his condition was worsening steadily. He could just barely manage to hold a fork and spoon but he could neither stand nor walk.

"Father, it appears Gotouda household's Shuuji-san has passed away. What shall we do about his posthumous name? "

His father and mother both looked at Seishin in surprise.

"That's, but he was still young."

Beside Miwako who was at a loss for words, Shinmei put down the spoon as if trying to throw it down.

"Shuuji..... Fuki-san's, youngest son, was he?"

Ever since falling ill, Shinmei's words were spoken haltingly. That he could speak, even inarticulately, gave an idea of his strength of will, of the impression of his wisdom.

Miwako drew her brows together, nodding at Shinmei.

"Shuuji-kun, who sold woodworking joints, yes? Was it said how he passed?"

"Something about summer cold complications. The Koike's Masaharu-san will be coming shortly..."

"Mm. I'll think, on the, posthumous, name."

Seishin nodded his head slightly. Even now he consulted with Shinmei about everything relating to the temple. The head monk of the temple was ultimately still Shinmei, with Seishin as the assistant chief, merely Shinmei's proxy. Being the head monk of the head temple had nothing to do with ability. It was a position based on a relationship of trust with the parishioners.

"Call, Toshio-kun."

"Yes. I will ask him about the state of things."

"And, the cemetery, arrangements."

Shinmei spoke shortly, Seishin nodded. Burying a person would require a plot of land large enough to do so. For each who died, the cemetery would have to be organized so that a spot wide enough for one was assured. A fir tree would be planted over the former mound, and its roots would dig out space. It wouldn't cause problems as long as the cemetery was organized.

"I will make arrangements with the manager."

Just as Seishin was leaving, Mitsuo poked his face into the separate building.

"Koike-san has arrived."

The elder Koike was, in spite of being in advanced age, slim but fit, with a good complexion, looking young for his age. He was the spitting image of hale and hearty.

"It's a terrible shame."

"Thank you for your hard work."

Koike knew the gist of things, conveying them as he sat in the office chair. "I'm at a loss for words that can comfort someone going through what Fuki-san is. It's a crime against one's parents to have them outlive you to do your funeral, they say."

Fanning his face with a folding fan, he downed the cup of barley tea brought by Mitsuo.

As many times as his father---and as many times as Seishin himself had done it, arranging a funeral service procedure was a simple matter. The wake would be today, the private funeral tomorrow, and as they were doing a burial, funeral services were kept short in the summer.

"Anyway, I'd like to ask if you could do the chanting of the Sutras soon. And as long as the posthumous name is appropriate, that'll be good," said Koike, fanning the back of his neck. "It was so sudden, it's all a mess."

"Father is concerned about the arrangements in the cemetery."

"Ah," Koike nodded. "It seems Fuki-san made arrangements for herself just a while back. Since it's summer, we shouldn't delay the funeral services. The contractors were spoke to and put a rush job on it. I'd like to say it's a relief, but when you think of Fuki-san's feelings, well. I mean, burying your son in the grave you made arrangements for for yourself, and all."

"Yes, indeed," Seishin murmured.

"By the way," Koike said, his voice indicating a change in topic. "Junior Monk, you've met with Hidemasa from Yamairi recently haven't you?"

"Yamairi's----Mursako Hidemasa-san, is it? No, the last I had seen him was

during the equinoctial week?"

"I was wondering if, at a time like this of all times, he was on a trip, or if maybe he said anything about going off somewhere---Well, I guess even if he did, it wouldn't mean anything now. We're talking about back during equinoctial week."

"Is he not in?"

"Yeah. We can't reach him. I mean, Hidemasa-san is Fuki-san's older brother. We've been calling all morning but it seems no one is in. I can't imagine in my wildest dreams that he'd be out in the mountains," Koike said as he stood. "Anyway, we'll be counting on you."

"I will be as prompt as I am able."

"Sorry for the trouble. ---Ah, before I go, I'll pay the head monk a visit."

Part 2

Seishin crossed the temple grounds, calling out to Mitsuo to take care of the temple in his stead. From the cemetery into the mountains thrust a path through the forest down the slope. It went through the sawmill lot across a ditch coming out at the bank. At the bank was a trodden route like a pathway that came to a dreary concrete building. Beyond the gate of branches in the hedges was the Ozaki Hospital back yard. It was a route he'd taken countless times since he was a child. In the country there were endless routes that weren't roads.

Crossing the back yard at his convenience, he opened the door he had been coming towards. At the service entryway staff used for coming and going was a step up into a small hallway and in that hall a glass sliding door cutting it off. He let himself in, arranging his shoes at the door just as the female nurse Ritsuko was passing by the other side of the partitioning door.

With a face that said 'Oh my', she was soon coming down the corridor to open the door.

"Good morning. Are you here for the doctor?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for coming during examination hours."

"Think nothing of it. Please come in." Ritsuko motioned to the examination room but Seishin refused.

"No, I'm dressed for duty, so here will be fine."

"Are you certain? Then, it will just be a minute if you could wait, please."

Ritsuko trotted briskly down the hall towards the examination room and returned promptly, gesturing behind her.

"He'll see you in the director's office---no, the waiting room, he says." Ritsuko giggled. "The doctor's face was practically saying 'I'm saved!'"

Somehow able to imagine that, Seishin smiled. Rumors of Shuuji's death were bound to be flying everywhere already. Patients probably took up more time gossiping than having their medical examinations---

He bowed his head lightly and entered the waiting room. The former director's office was demolished when the addition was put on and was no longer there. In its place, a small closet was made out next to the examination rooms, which Toshio made into his own waiting room. Different from the former director, there was no special decor in the function-first, drab room. The guest's sofa belonged to the predecessor but it was always primed for napping with a pillow and blanket out over it, and the walls were packed with catalogues and such materials crammed in place. He knocked strictly as a formality before letting himself in, just as Toshio was entering from the examination room.

"A literal Buddha in Hell."

"Sorry about this."

"Right now I can see a halo glowing around your head. It's like I've been suffering penances for something one after another since this morning," Toshio said pushing the blanket aside and sitting on the sofa, stretching his feet out over the table. "The people that usually have no problem just coming in to pick up their meds from the pharmacy and going home today suddenly want a consultation. Then in the end, when you ask what they want to talk about, it's all about Gotouda."

Seishin smiled bitterly. Most of his patients were elderly, so there were all the more whose conditions were one step forward, one step back. Arthritis and lower back pain, skin diseases, high blood pressure and the like weren't the worst conditions to be inflicted with but it was hard to call those who made up the majority of his patients healthy. Some of the patients who had been coming in for the longest time would only give word to the nurses before letting themselves into the treatment rooms, or would call up and demand a certain medication and that their family would be by to pick it up. Three years ago, when Toshio had inherited the hospital, he was eager to abolish such disorder but he immediately threw up both hands in defeat. He'd learned that in a village overrun by the elderly, if the patients didn't want to cooperate, the hospital couldn't do a thing about it.

Toshio stretched his body out over the sofa and looked up at Seishin. "And? After all, I'm sure you came about Shuuji-san too. I'll just be saying the same story to you too. ---On your way to do the bedside sutras?"

"Mm. Before that, I thought I would ask you about the state of things."

Toshio nodded. Toshio knew that it was a tradition Seishin was taking over from his father. There was no need to say what he was here to ask about or why.

"By the time I was called and hurried in by his mother, Shuuji-san was long gone. Livor mortis was showing and rigor mortis had set in. It's likely he died during the night. I got there a little before seven in the morning, I guess? I can at least say he didn't just die at dawn. It was probably something that happened late at night."

"What was the cause?"

Toshio's eyes widened as if he were utterly shocked that he was even being asked. "It's not like I was tending to him! Before that when he was laid up in bed, I didn't do any kind of medical examination, so how would I know what the cause of death was? The last time I examined Shuuji-san, he looked beyond healthy. ---Besides having to take off a toe nail from his big toe when he dropped something on his foot. And we're talking about half a year ago with that!"

As Seishin gave a bitter smile, there was a knock. The nurse Ritsuko entered carrying a tray.

"Is he grumbling to you?" Ritsuko laughed with a wry smile, then scowled at Toshio. "Doctor, manners."

"This table is from today forward a footstool."

"Then, please move your feet off of the foot stool so that I may set the tea down," Ritsuko said lightly smacking Toshio's legs, putting the tea cups set aside on the low table into place.

"Good grief," Toshio stated, lowering his feet.

"Oh, Doctor. You're crabby, just because your patients won't leave you

alone."

"I'm going cockeyed here. No matter where I look, it's nothing but old people pouring in. On top of that the old farts were lined up outside the entryway first thing in the morning! Thanks to that I've been dancing around with things to do non-stop. It's only the patients who actually need an examination who wait until it's beyond help to try coming in. In the first place," Toshio said thrusting his cup out towards Seishin. "It's not like the people who never seem to be bedridden are people who never get sick, they're the people who can hold out even when their condition's more or less crappy. They've got a good grip on themselves, so if it's just a cold, they'll let it heal while they work. They push through pain. When those kind of people are bedridden, it's something really keeping them in bed. Then the people around them figure since they're rarely laid up, it'll fix itself soon enough and wave it off, but they'll tend to the spoiled babies who'll go 'this hurts' or 'that's bad' all the time."

"That's an overstatement," Seishin said with a wry smile.

"Gotouda's Shuuji-san was like that. Even though the man was laid up three days before, his mother never called a doctor, didn't bring him to the hospital. Then in the end, she goes to try to wake him up and he's dead. He didn't have much of a fever, so she thought he had a light summer cold or heatstroke."

"I see...."

"With just asking what happened, I don't have a damn clue what the hell was wrong with him, what had him bedridden. No cough, no fever hot enough to notice, didn't seem like any place in particular was hurting. Still, his complexion was bad, he seemed like he was extremely worn out, and he didn't seem like he was eating, she said."

And with that in the end she made the decision not to have a doctor see him, Seishin thought casting his eyes down. Nobody wanted to think that someone in their family had a serious illness. They averted their eyes and wrapped it up it with the words 'it couldn't be', pretending that possibility didn't exist. By doing that, they determinedly keep it from floating to mind.

Toshio breathed a dejected sigh. "It's what they call sudden death. We won't know the cause of death without an autopsy, and even with an autopsy, if it

was so-called sudden death, we won't know the reason. Besides, the Missus of the Gotoudas herself said no to an autopsy."

"Did you recommend something like that?"

"As a necessary formality. But, you can't just force the body away from a bereaved family. It wasn't an administrative autopsy or a legally ordered one after all. There's no choice when it gets like this. I used my last resort and went with 'acute heart failure' on the death certificate. It's like a trump card."

Seishin figured that Toshio was dissatisfied with that end result. When a villager came to the hospital, there was nothing to do but determine whether or not to send them to a larger hospital that could do a thorough investigation. They wanted someone to screen them to see whether they should tend to themselves at home or entrust themselves to a doctor's care. Patients not seeking that were seeking harmless medications, someone to listen to them complain, and that was it. Toshio had always resisted being put in that position but he didn't think there was really any way something like that could be fought.

"The one left behind is the one acting more like a patient. Well, I did let her cry out all her complaints."

Seishin nodded, glancing at his wristwatch. He had to go now. He grasped, at least, that to the family it was a sudden---a no doubt unreasonable death. It was hard to ask the details of a bereaved family stricken with grief. But without knowing the circumstances of the death, there was no telling what kind of careless things might be said. So, the Ozaki Hospital was asked about these matters in advance. The village only had one hospital. For the most part, no dead could be buried without first passing through Toshio's hands.

The village is surrounded by death.

---What was surrounded may have been Seishin as a monk, Toshio as a doctor.

Part 3

The Gotouda home was in Kami-Sotoba. Kami-Sotoba ran parallel to the village road along the river bank, extending north, a complex mingling with the community of Monzen which stretched out at the southern region of the temple. While Gotouda's house was in the middle of Kami-Sotoba, far further north of that was the northern mountain the temple was on. It stood as if to whittle away the eastern bank.

"Somehow, he seemed so sluggish," Fuki said, wiping at the corner of her eye. "At first I wondered if it was heat stroke, that's what I said. He must have eaten something bad, I thought, and then he was bedridden. He wasn't ever one to get sick, so I let my guard down, and he himself said if he just slept, he'd get better... That was..."

Seishin watched helplessly, waiting in the corner of the tatami room as Fuki burst out crying, on her knees before her condolence caller. It was tragic when a child lost a parent but when a parent lost a child something about it seemed wrong, he thought of it as all the more of a tragedy.

"I should have had a doctor examine him!" Fuki cried out. "Even if Shuuji was against it, I should have had the Junior Doctor come!"

The old man Koike patted Fuki's back. Of those gathered to help, the old women gathered around Fuki seemed to have found her crying contagious. In the tatami room, separated off, were those watching Fuki, their eyes filled with pity.

"But Shuuji-kun was always so healthy."

"They say the healthier a person is, the more sudden their death is."

"The people around him and he himself, nobody thought much of it."

And then, hearing voices of another group, Seishin faintly knitted his brows.

"...a surprise, a gated wall with such an elegant roof."

"Something like that was built? By who?"

"I just said, by the Maebara's Obaa-chan."

"But that woman doesn't have anyone to even pass it on to."

"That's right. Living on a pension like she is, spending so much money, what does she think she's doing?"

"Oh, but doesn't that woman have mountains of money?"

"Mountains you say, but isn't it on the Yamairi, Mountain Entrance, village road? Even if it's dirt cheap, there certainly won't be any buyers!"

Seishin breathed a low sigh. The village was small. Extended family, meet ups, youth groups, and all sorts of organizations made a complicated web of interpersonal relationships. That said, it didn't mean that all relationships would necessarily be deep ones. Even if there was enough of a connection to hurry to a funeral service, they didn't necessarily care enough for the dead to mourn them; there were countless such relationships throughout the village.

"I'm so sorry," a small voice said. Seishin turned back. An old woman who had come to help refilled Seishin's tea cup. "If you could please continue waiting a little longer, until the guests stop coming in."

With a nod, Seishin exhaled lightly. In such a scene as this, he had to keep a cool, refined expression---

Death wasn't a rare thing for the village. There were many elderly in the village or rather, many deaths. To the villagers, a senior's death was no tragedy. It was an unavoidable part of man's work; the elderly had finished the pilgrimage called life and returned to the mountains. Those born in the village fulfilled their works as man and soon returned off to the mount.

But, Shuuji had not finished his work. From time to time in the village, there was something unusual that happened. For the one who had passed on and for the ones left behind, it was sheer tragedy, but the dead would at times, unable to wait for a person's homecoming, appear from out of the fir trees and carry someone off. Shuuji was carried off by such demons.

--A Shiki.

As Seishin sat silent with his thoughts, the manager old man Koike spoke, telling him to go on. Seishin moved to Shuuji's bedside to read the sutras.

Seishin finished chanting the sutras and Shuuji's body was placed in the coffin. Seeing that for the moment, there was nobody at Fuki's side, Seishin approached her.

"Then for now I will depart. Please accept my deepest condolences. He will be dearly missed."

Fuki nodded. The retired former head monk was also a gentle man but his son was even more of a gentle, soft spoken one. In an instant she was seized by an urge to spit out everything.

(It's not as if I didn't pay attention!)

There was no way she could not be worried about her bedridden son. She thought about calling the doctor, she thought about it so many times. She was only afraid, what if calling the doctor lead to something even worse than not calling him? It was because she was worried about her son.

(The blood in his futon...)

Fuki looked up at Seishin, and then in one motion returned her gaze to the string of Juzu prayer beads in her lap.

(It's all over now.)

It was far too late to be asking what had happened to Shuuji now.

"Thank you very much. ...I will be depending on you again this evening as well." That was all that Fuki said. Seishin nodded.

"It is a troubling time but please do take care of yourself. It is painful for us to lose Shuuji-san but, if Fuki-san were to similarly fall ill, please know that there would be many similarly hurt for your sake."

Fuki nodded.

(But, there was blood in my boy's futon...)

Giving his greetings to the people gathered as he sought out Koike, Seishin found him in the living room talking on the phone.

"Koike-san, I will be taking my leave."

At Seishin's voice, with the receiver silent at his ear, Koike nodded back at him: "Aa. Thank you for today. We'll be counting on you for the wake as well," he said to Seishin, hanging up the receiver and then mumbling to himself.

"....Where did he go off to?"

"The Murasako's Hidemasa-san, you mean?"

To Seishin's question, old man Koike gave a perplexed nod. "I'd think he'd either have to be in the fields or in the mountains but. ---That's right, Junior Monk, you know Hidemasa-san's and that mountain area, don't you?"

"I believe I do. It is near the graveyard. If you'd like, should I go out there? I do not have any other plans for a while today, either way."

A relieved half-smile rose over old man Koike's face. "If you don't mind me asking. It's a sorry shame to have to ask this much of you but. At any rate, there's nobody who knows both Hidemasa-san and those mountains. If we looked I'm sure we'd find someone who knew them but, we've got to get to digging that grave in a bit here."

"I'll go. If I try looking in the mountains and am not able to find him, I will leave a note at his house."

Seishin departed from the Gotouda house and returned briefly to the temple to tell Mitsuo the situation. He changed into western style clothes more appropriate for entering the mountains and left the temple.

Driving along the private road beside the belfry, he came to the bottom of stone steps before the mountain gate. At the bottom of the stone steps was a short, steep hill road with traditional stone paving which continued for about two hundred meters, all sculpting a backdrop of a town once built around the temple. The old general store where candles and incense were, the flower shop in the grotto, and the assorted Buddhist altar equipment which included the sotoba and coffins used in the village were akin the three treasures of Buddhism: the Buddha, the sutras and the priesthood. The shrine's Otabisho's in this once very small temple town was a remnant of the time when the temple and the shrine were one entity.

The car drove on slowly, shop keeps and others coming out the front to see him. He saw in the rear view mirror as they bowed their heads, seeing him off. There was a seemingly endless flow of people walking past the turn at the Otabisho onto the asphalt road, likely going towards Gotouda's house. Most were walking the village road along the riverbank. Of each and every person he passed, they all turned when they noticed the car approaching, bowing their heads to him as they realized it was Seishin at the wheel.

---That, there, was Seishin's burden.

Part 4

"Ah, it's the Junior Monk." Mutou saw off the passing white sedan. "He was out of uniform. The bedside sutras are already over."

Yuuki stared in befuddlement as Mutou murmured.

Mutou had come a calling to him that morning, saying that there was a burial. Villagers came to help out when there were funeral services. It seemed there was an organization called the Mourning Crew made for those in the neighborhoods to help each other out. He knew there was an organization like that but until then Yuuki had never been a part of that Mourning Crew. It was the first time he'd been invited like this, at those words "You coming?" he sensed deep in his heart as he set out that at last he, too, was being entered into the village's society of neighborly graces.

Yet all the same, being lead out of the home by Mutou who had invited him, the surroundings utterly lacked the air of a funeral, and Mutou was headed through Naka-Sotoba to Kami-Sotoba. Yuuki followed after quietly, certain that the services must have been at the temple, yet there they were heading not to the temple, but Kami-Sotoba. Wasn't it a key point that there was a neighborhood association style system in place? Then why must they go to the far and away Kami-Sotoba? Yuuki couldn't make sense of it.

"Mutou-san," Yuuki came to a stop and called to Mutou. "We've come to Kami-Sotoba. Aren't we heading to the temple?"

"We're going to Gotouda's house. We're the Mourning Crew."

"So why---" Just as Yuuki was about to try to ask just what this Mourning Crew was to do, he saw a man coming up from the paths between the rice fields. "Hirosawa-san!"

"Ah, hello," Hirosawa said with his usual gentle smile. "Is that right, Mutou-san and Yuuki-san are also a part of this Mourning Crew?"

"Saying it like that means Hirosawa-san is, too?" Yuuki blinked. This was

another thing he couldn't grasp. Yuuki and Mutou were from Naka-Sotoba's third squad, and while he didn't know which squad number Hirosawa was a part of, at the very least he knew he wasn't from squad three. And why were they meeting up at a funeral in Kami-Sotoba?

Hirosawa must have noticed the perplexed look on Yuuki's face, smiling as he rose up to the same level of the road from the fields. "I'm in the same Mourning Crew. Naka-Sotoba Third."

"But..."

"I live in the sixth squad though. However, as the Mourning Crew and the squads are separate things..."

Haa, Yuuki gave with a vague nod.

"Yuuki-san is in the third squad of Naka-Sotoba. I am the sixth squad. That's an administrative division. Sotoba has administrative distinctions, district divisions, with Sotoba itself split into six districts. Each named community is a district. These are further separated into squads, based on where your house is located."

"The Mourning Crew isn't like that?"

"Correct. This is because the village has head families and branch families. The Mourning Crew is fundamentally based on squads but there's also the connection between the branch families not located where the head family is. Auspicious and inauspicious occasions ultimately can't exist separate from consanguinity."

"Ah, is that how it is? Be it auspicious or inauspicious, in the end, those with blood ties will be there either way."

"That's how it is, yes? In the past---until my father's time, there was what was called a Celebratory Crew who got together to offer congratulations but nowadays there aren't any who have weddings in the main family's tatami room, anymore."

"Were the Celebratory Crew and the Mourning Crew the same thing?"

"There is a subtle distinction. The Mourning Crew is in the temple's dominion, but the Celebratory Crew is in the shrine's dominion. The Mourning Crew's management was heavily tied to the temple parishioner's organizations, and the Celebratory Crew was heavily tied to the village's official shrine parish organization. So, though they were the same houses, the Mourning Crew and the Celebratory Crew had a few different members."

"I see," interrupted Mutou. "You didn't get that, so that's why you've been tilting your head like you were confused for a while now."

Yuuki forced a smile. "Right. I was thinking 'what, this is the way to Kami-Sotoba isn't it?' But I see, blood ties, is it."

"That is what it comes down to. I live in the sixth squad but my main family is in the third squad, so I'm affiliated with the Naka-Sotoba's Mourning Crew's third division. Gotouda is the same. Her house is in Kami-Sotoba but her Mourning Crew is the Naka-Sotoba third division."

"I see. Speaking of Hirosawa, they're next to my house. That must be your main family's place, then."

Hirosawa smiled. "It isn't the house next to yours; it's the furthest south in the third squad. They're also Hirosawas, they're the main branch. The Hirosawas that are your neighbors may have long ago been related to ours but as for the present, there is no connection."

"Ah, come to think of it, there were Hirosawas down there too, huh---Now that I think of it, there are a lot of Hirosawa households, aren't there?"

Indeed, Hirosawa nodded.

"There are four distinct family lines in the village. Takemura, Tamo, Yasumori and Murasako are the four houses. Those four appear to have been the families that established the village. There are some who add the Hirosawas and count it as five families, as well. That's how many Hirosawas there are. Lately the Tamo and Murasakos are dwindling too, so I wonder... There may in fact be more Hirosawas, after all. "

Yuuki's eyes widened. "The village was established in-----"

"It seems to have been in the early days of the Edo period."

"Were they here that long? The four families, too? And they're still carrying on right here to this day?"

For someone born and raised in the city like Yuuki that was at least a bit shocking. Yuuki himself was born in the city but his father was from Touhoku in northern Honshu and his mother was from the Toukai regions in mid-southern Honshu. And you couldn't say they had taken root anywhere; in fact he didn't have any idea where his grandparents' parents' generation may have been or come from.

"Seems to be the case. As for the temple being built, that was about a hundred years after the fact but, by the time the temple was built, the four families and the Hirosawas were already in place. Of course, back then they didn't quite have last names, but."

"That is amazing," Yuuki said with a breath half full of wonder. "That must be what they mean by taking root someplace."

Hirosawa smiled. Looking at it from Yuuki's viewpoint, that was seen as the smile, the composure of one who was firm, resolute from having taken root someplace.

Part 5

"Ah, it's the Junior Monk." Mutou saw off the passing white sedan. "He was out of uniform. The bedside sutras are already over."

Yuuki stared in befuddlement as Mutou murmured.

Mutou had come a calling to him that morning, saying that there was a burial. Villagers came to help out when there were funeral services. It seemed there was an organization called the Mourning Crew made for those in the neighborhoods to help each other out. He knew there was an organization like that but until then Yuuki had never been a part of that Mourning Crew. It was the first time he'd been invited like this, at those words "You coming?" he sensed deep in his heart as he set out that at last he, too, was being entered into the village's society of neighborly graces.

Yet all the same, being lead out of the home by Mutou who had invited him, the surroundings utterly lacked the air of a funeral, and Mutou was headed through Naka-Sotoba to Kami-Sotoba. Yuuki followed after quietly, certain that the services must have been at the temple, yet there they were heading not to the temple, but Kami-Sotoba. Wasn't it a key point that there was a neighborhood association style system in place? Then why must they go to the far and away Kami-Sotoba? Yuuki couldn't make sense of it.

"Mutou-san," Yuuki came to a stop and called to Mutou. "We've come to Kami-Sotoba. Aren't we heading to the temple?"

"We're going to Gotouda's house. We're the Mourning Crew."

"So why---" Just as Yuuki was about to try to ask just what this Mourning Crew was to do, he saw a man coming up from the paths between the rice fields. "Hirosawa-san!"

"Ah, hello," Hirosawa said with his usual gentle smile. "Is that right, Mutou-san and Yuuki-san are also a part of this Mourning Crew?"

"Saying it like that means Hirosawa-san is, too?" Yuuki blinked. This was another thing he couldn't grasp. Yuuki and Mutou were from Naka-Sotoba's third squad, and while he didn't know which squad number Hirosawa was a part of, at the very least he knew he wasn't from squad three. And why were they meeting up at a funeral in Kami-Sotoba?

Hirosawa must have noticed the perplexed look on Yuuki's face, smiling as he rose up to the same level of the road from the fields. "I'm in the same Mourning Crew. Naka-Sotoba Third."

"But..."

"I live in the sixth squad though. However, as the Mourning Crew and the squads are separate things..."

Haa, Yuuki gave with a vague nod.

"Yuuki-san is in the third squad of Naka-Sotoba. I am the sixth squad. That's an administrative division. Sotoba has administrative distinctions, district divisions, with Sotoba itself split into six districts. Each named community is a district. These are further separated into squads, based on where your house is located."

"The Mourning Crew isn't like that?"

"Correct. This is because the village has head families and branch families. The Mourning Crew is fundamentally based on squads but there's also the connection between the branch families not located where the head family is. Auspicious and inauspicious occasions ultimately can't exist separate from consanguinity."

"Ah, is that how it is? Be it auspicious or inauspicious, in the end, those with blood ties will be there either way."

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5

Seishin headed north along the road at the riverbank. Passing through Kami-Sotoba which he had just left shortly before, the car drove on towards Yamairi. Once out of Kami-Sotoba, the shoulders of the road faded, making the road all the more narrow. The road was detoured, curving around the base of the northern mountain that housed the temple. It became a gently rising roadway.

On one side of the road was a dense forest of firs, drawing up all the way to the point where the mountain was shaved away to level the road. The retaining wall that held the structure up was made of old raw ore from the river, covered in moss and ferns. On the opposite side of that structure was the roadside row of firs, and beyond it flowed the mountain stream. However, this point was rather high up on the river canyon, so the surface of the water couldn't be seen from here. That mountain stream became thinner bit by bit until it was at last separated from the road. At that point, there was little to see to be called a

road, the space between the trees minimal enough that two cars could collide in passing. There was nothing to serve as a guard rail nor was there a center line.

The firs locked in all fields of view, only the trunks cutting through the monotony of green. Just around the curve was an interruption in the forest, a valley---no, not a valley, a community, opened within a basin between mountain. Along the detour around the northern mountain to its northern face, there it was. That was Yamairi.

The road met the woodland path, becoming thinner still, leading up towards the neighborhood. The slim hill road was a separation between rice fields, dotted with houses. In the past the community was the point of entry into the mountains but as forestry declined, so too did the population, down to two households, with only three people living there.

Yamairi was quiet as if sleeping. Only the voices of the cicadas and a faint breeze came in through the open car window. It had always been a quiet place but Seishin felt as if he'd lost his way in an abandoned house. The day when it would at last be truly abandoned may not have been far off. The married Murasako Hidemasa and Mieko and Ohkawa Gigorou were advanced in age, to the point where it wouldn't be unheard of for something to happen to them.

How much longer will there be a Yamairi to come to, Seishin wondered as he surveyed the community. The hill road weaved between two slopes, continuing on narrowly beyond the curve. There were around ten homes visible but of them most were dilapidated, only two of the buildings having any inhabitants. Amongst the houses abandoned long ago were buildings with their roofs warped and caving in. A house without a master was quick to fall to ruin. In one of the lower six communities, a house like that would find a buyer if only out of idle curiosity but likely not so in Yamairi. ----The neighborhood was to be swallowed up by the firs.

It was as he was thinking such a thought that his eyes stopped over one particular house. Over the closed storm shutter was a fresh plank of wood hammered into place. While giving a thought to its peculiarity, Seishin went on past that, displaying some skill in driving up to a certain house. If they weren't answering the phone, they must have been in the mountains but for prudence's

sake he entered the Murasako property.

Each of the houses in Yamairi were quite tall. Whittling into the mountain, houses were built of packed stone walls. They were surely constructed in tandem with that road that entered and left the mountains. He stopped on that slope and for the time being headed for the entryway. While lingering on how to convey the news of the deceased, he called out as he opened the entryway. As he pulled the sliding storm door facing the front yard half open, he recalled how strange it was for a front door to be closed in this summer's midday heat, when an offensive smell took hold of him in that entryway. It was the smell of something or another rotting. A bad feeling struck him.

"Murasako-san?" Seishin called out one more time but there was no answer. Disturbed, he left the entryway, further into the house itself to look about. "Murasako-san, are you in?"

Something clawed at his senses as Seishin called out into the house. Only adding to that premonition was the fact that there was no response from anywhere within. No face poked out from the back, nobody came out from the outhouse. All of the front windows had been closed, the curtains tightly drawn. In the village, even when going into the mountains or the fields, people did not lock their doors. Moreover when it was summer. Not wanting the hot air to stagnate, houses were left open for the breeze.

Ohkawa Gigorou may know something, he thought as he went to the back of the house for good measure. He found the kitchen door and tried opening it.

"Murasako-sa---" Mid-word, Seishin suddenly cut off. The instant the door was opened, the smell came barreling out as if bludgeoning him in the face.

On the concrete spread beneath the clay floor, shoes were scattered, dark red stains spreading, splotching out. Above the stain flies swarmed, rising to a spiral as if surprised by the wind before returning to the stain.

(.....Blood?)

That looked like a bloodstain. Seishin held his breath lightly, timidly peering in.

There was a rather large step up from the doorway and another one up into

the kitchen. There was a small table set, a dinning-kitchen style set up but one chair was toppled, diagonal, as if pushed away from the table by somebody. The vinyl tablecloth was half off, the odds and ends on the table fallen and scattered. With the floor littered with things thrown down over it, it left the impression of terrible chaos. Seishin thought it had looked as if a child had just finished playing but what were scattered about were not toys.

That was when he saw pelt of fur, off of a dog or something else. Scattered over the cleaned portions of the floor were splotches of black-red dying every which way. And, that vehement smell.

"This is..." As the words slipped out, he covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve without thinking. The smell of rot streamed into the back of his throat, as if to choke him into a coughing fit. That feeling was now accompanied by nausea. That relatively large pelt looked like it was torn from the body of a dog or something, or perhaps like a foot. It could have been the foot from a small brown rabbit but it was tumbled in the entryway. Here and everywhere about it, insects gushing, a tightly packed crowd of flies.

"Murasako-san, hello...?!"

He shouted out but all that came of it were the flies jumping. Seishin retreated. He knew himself how pale he had become.

Something happened. If not, there was no way that they would leave things in that state, was there? How many were there? It was impossible to tell with only one look. There was no way to tell what they were originally. There were probably several if not more animals whose bodies had been torn to bits and left to rot.

What came to mind first was wild dogs. The only time bears were heard about in Sotoba were in folklore or other fake stories told by the elderly. It seemed there were rumors that dogs had gotten lost in the woods forming a great number of wild dogs, but setting whether there were enough to properly call a great number or not aside, there were many who had seen dogs in the mountains, many who had heard them crying.

Seishin remembered the dilapidated house he'd passed. It had the sliding storm door boarded over. Could not the wild dogs have been nesting in the

abandoned house? And then those wild dogs intruded even into the homes where people were living and---

(Intruding, and then?) A tremble shot through him from the soles of his feet. (A dog could lay waste to a young man in a house.There'd be nobody there to stop it.)

"---It can't be." Saying it to himself, Seishin looked over his surroundings. Finding a broom toppled over in the garden by the doorway, he picked it up. Now armed, he headed towards the back yard. A wild beast could come charging, so he kept his guard up, changing the position of the broom in his hands countless times.

While calling out "Murasako-san!" time and time again, he came to the back yard, piled with useless heaps. Drawing near to the back of the house, a narrow garden sat between the building and a cliff, largely unreached by the sun's rays. He spied the sliding glass doors on the garden veranda, narrowly opened.

Seishin peered in through the half opened door. The sliding shouji door inside the glass he peered through was just faintly opened from the right hand side. He opened the glass until he could see in, an unobstructed view of a pair of eyes gazing straight up at him.

The one splayed out in the room appeared to be peeking out through the shouji with vacant, open eyes. The cloudiness of those eyes did not go unnoticed by Seishin. Unblinking, and face discolored with black and blue, the muscles moving not an inch. And---that rotting smell.

Shouting "Murasako-san!" as he peered at that face from beyond the shouji, he could recognize it as Mieko. Behind Mieko's stretched out form could be seen a Buddhist family altar, and before it were spread two futons. On one of them, the summer bedding was rolled up at the foot end. In the other there appeared to be a person lying but at that beside swarmed a pillar of flies, gathering, swirling, engulfing.

Over the tatami leaked a sickly, tawny liquid from the futon with someone still inside. He knew that somebody was lying in that futon but who that was he did not know. The bedding formed an ovular lump, a disgusting color as if melting with what was beneath it. Above the tatami were splotched, smeared

stains, and above them countless flies stopping on and flying about.

As Seishin gaped at the sight before him in a daze, a fly came to a stop on Mieko's open eye ball.

He leaped back. His voice wouldn't come, much less in a scream. He by no means had the mind to step inside, rather, Seishin forced his legs to pump through the feeling of having had his insides drawn out, rushing to the front yard.

The front of the house was, in a somehow satirical way, bathed in rays of sunlight.

The sun was strong, reflecting white rays off of the concrete spread over the slope, between deep black crevices. The land and the concrete were both so bright it stung the eyes.

(What a sight)

Seishin quickly left the yard, going to higher grounds, towards Ohkawa Gigorou's house. Feeling too impatient to get in, turn the key, and drive, he was in no state to use the car.

There was no sound nor presence throughout the neighborhood. The voices of the cicadas filled the emptiness, as if closing in. The sunlight reflected off of the asphalt and the stone wall just a ways ahead along the narrow road, an intricate reflection, a mirage as if the air itself were radiating light.

He stormed the dried grounds, shouting as he ran up to the front porch, the porch where Seishin smelt that atrocious, rotting smell. Unlike the Murasako home, Gigorou's house's storm door was left open, the shouji pulled back, a cool breeze flowing into the clearly visibly, unmanned living room. Nevertheless, as if the inside of the house were faintly echoing the clamor outside, that awful mephitic was stagnant.

"Ohkawa-san, Gigorou-san!" Seishin called out, but there was no answer. Even if nerves had drawn his voice higher pitched, the monk's voice carried well. Nevertheless, no matter how many times he called out there was, of course, no answer, no sign nor hint of anyone moving. Slightly hesitant, Seishin stepped up into the living room. As soon as he stepped in, there was a

telephone rack.

(Two, possibly three people.)

And, Yamairi only had three people. ---Yes, if by chance Gigorou was safe, he would have peeked in on the Murasako household when they'd gone unseen. If he had done so, he couldn't have missed that disastrous scene, he couldn't have failed to contact somebody about it.

Seishin grasped the phone receiver. His own hand trembled violently with his realization.

He looked upwards to regain control of his breathing, the scene outside staggering him. The neighborhood baking in the sun. It was originally mostly empty houses, but it had immediately become entirely empty houses. The stone walls, the gardens, the roads, everything here had lost all meaning. The dying community had truly died. ---Yamairi would be swallowed up by the fires.

The voices of the cicadas in the mountains were thunderous. The voices of the birds mingled with them. Outside of the houses, sunlight radiated, the firs were green, and the clear blue sky was serenely stretched above the mountaintops.

Part 6

"I'm back."

Ritsuko looked up from the magazine as that voice called out. Looking in the open break room doorway, Toshio had just returned through the back door, examination bag in hand. By Saturday afternoon, the only one left was Ritsuko who volunteered to house-sit.

"Welcome back," Ritsuko said, entering the waiting room where Toshio stood. "How was Shou-kun?"

"Mild case of heatstroke."

"Oh dear."

Toshio didn't mind house calls. If he was called, he'd grab his bag and head out, carefree. Even if he wasn't specifically called out, he'd go out to take care of some business like today, seeing if the kids were well, consulting on whether it'd be better to bring them in or not. If it was far, he'd take the car, if it was nearby he'd walk, or requisition one of the nurse's bicycles, as even if it was close, summers were hot. Even now he was soaked in sweat.

"The heat is just terrible isn't it, this year." Ritsuko turned up the air conditioning. "Would you like something cold to drink?"

"A beer," Toshio said wearily, throwing down his bag.

"Yes, yes. A dark brew with no foam, yes?"

"When I say beer, I mean beer."

Smiling at the ever obstinate Toshio, Ritsuko stepped out of the room. She went to the tea room and poured cold barley tea into a glass. While she was at it, she took a small cup of sherbet from the fridge and a spoon. When she brought them back to the waiting room, Toshio was in front of the cooler vent, letting the breeze blow down his collar.

"A snack with your drink."

"Now that's service."

Setting the glass and cup on the table and watching Toshio sit, Ritsuko held the tray to her chest. "A bit ago, the Maebara's Obaa-chan had come by. Maebara Setsu-san. She was out of medicine and said to give her more."

Toshio peeled the top off of the sherbet and thrust the spoon in. "The Maebara's Setsu-san---she's on thyradin for her Hashimoto's disease, wasn't it?"

"Yes. That condition doesn't seem to be going well. It seems she didn't feel it was working, so she decided to take more of it."

"How stupid. Setsu-san is prone to heart attacks. That is the dumbest idea, that right there."

"I explained as much to her but she said she was out of medicine either way, so to give it to her."

"Old people get like that. They get to thinking they can just make medicine more effective by taking more of it."

"I had told her that I would not dispense medications without the doctor's orders and to please wait for you to return but she wouldn't listen. There was no choice, I did as her last prescription said and dispersed only two days' worth. I wouldn't give any more medicine than that, so I sent her off to return on Monday."

"That old woman hates needles, so she tries to miss me. She knows if she has an exam there'll be a blood test with it."

"I hope that she comes to her appointment properly, though. If she doesn't, I don't know what we'll do."

"Mix it with some methimazole on her."

"Doctor."

Ritsuko sighed.

"What's wrong? If we have a hormone and an anti-hormone, the balance

sheet checks out, doesn't it?"

"That is not the problem."

Ritsuko looked up to the ceiling, realizing there was no treatment for him. That was when the phone rang. When Ritsuko moved to answer, Toshio, spoon held in his mouth, raised a hand. "Ah, it's fine. I got it. Go on home."

As he had said as much and she had seen him pick up the receiver, Ritsuko bowed her head indicating her intent to leave. Toshio nodded in his own answer of a gesture, then, suddenly, his voice rose with a "What?" Ritsuko stopped in her tracks without thinking, watching Toshio's suddenly grim expression.

"All of them? Really? ---The police."

At the word 'police' she startled, still clutching the tray as she took a long, hard look at Toshio's face. She subconsciously strained her ears, but she couldn't hear the voice on the other end.

"It needs to be reported. No, it's fine, I'll call them from here. ---Yeah, don't, definitely don't move them. Don't touch anything, just wait outside, all right?"

Somebody must have collapsed. Ritsuko tensed slightly.

"So, you haven't confirmed Gigorou-Jii-san's body's dead, huh?"

Ritsuko's brows knit together. Gigorou---was that Yamairi's Ohkawa Gigorou?

"Confirm it. The hell's a monk getting wound up over a corpse? If he is breathing, a doctor'll be there. You're sure about Murasako-san at least, right? -- No, it's fine. Anyway, I'm coming, so wait there. In the meantime, check out Gigorou-jii-san, if he's breathing call an ambulance. I'll be right there."

Talking fast, Toshio hung up the phone, looking at Ritsuko who stood there. He kept it short.

"A catastrophe in Yamairi."

Part 7

"Aren't we lucky, Shigeki-kun! It was nothing!"

At the sound of Yano Kanami's voice, Maeda Motoko turned from the window table with a smile. "When I first heard, it was like my insides froze to ice, though. He hasn't had a hint of a fever or any nightmares at night either, so it looks like it really was nothing. How embarrassing, I was such a mess..."

Kanami smiled from the counter. "When it comes to their children, that's what mothers do."

Kanami, the one speaking of children and mothers, left her children with the other party in the divorce. She didn't say much, but Motoko thought: wasn't it as if her children were taken away by her partner?

"I was inexcusable to the Junior Monk. I wonder if I shouldn't go to offer an apology?"

"It'll be all right won't it? I won't stop you from going to speak your gratitude but he's not that hard of a person. He has a gentle temperament, our Junior Monk. Even when you were going at him as if to bite his head off, he didn't seem to have any hard feelings towards you."

She murmured her relief, setting the tableware atop the table when she heard a patrol car siren. She looked up with a start, eyes going to the national highway beyond the wide pane of glass.

From the counter Kanami strained her ears. Kanami's drive-in faced the entrance to the village, and from the counter you could see the national highway that lead towards the town of Mizobe. In the distance, passing beneath the expressway overpass, a patrol car could be seen drawing closer. She knew that Motoko at the window would be stiffening.

"It's all right, Motoko."

She smiled, conveying to Motoko that it surely had nothing to do with Sotoba. Motoko returned a clumsy smile, gathering the utensils on the tray and moved back to the counter but when the car passed by the window and from there took the turn towards the village road along the riverbank, she was surprised.

(Did something happen? ---But, what?)

Motoko let out a small wail. Kanami clapped her hand over that. "It isn't Shigeki-kun. There's nothing to worry about. ---But, I do wonder if something did happen?"

(Is it an accident?)

Of course it went without saying that she hoped it wasn't Motoko's child, on the one-in-a-million chance. So Kanami thought, giving her friend a deliberate pat on the arm. With an uneasiness she couldn't place, they watched the two patrol cars and the paddy-wagon grey van drive on.

At just that moment, at the Takemura Stationary Shop just a little ways north of the Drive-in, the old folks were gathered about the shop front. The elderly were at their usual stools exchanging idle gossip when suddenly the siren blared, the sight of the patrol car racing through causing them to stand at once.

"What's this, an accident, ey?"

Oitarou stood and saw the passing patrol car leave. Keeping watch for its destination, he confirmed that it was headed straight along the riverbank village road. "It's going up. Wonder if something happened, in Kami-Sotoba or maybe Monzen."

"It was probably some accident, I'm sure." Yaeko said, causing Takeko to give a nasal snort.

"I'll bet it's Ohkawa's brat." The Ohkawa Liquor Shop's boy was one they all turned their noses up at. He'd been a bad-tempered hooligan for a long time, and even the way he drove the delivery motorbike was wild. "Perhaps he's run himself into something. I'd always knew it would happen one day."

Takemura Tatsu had no particular words to interject. At most, she wondered, 'would that patrol cars be coming out just for an accident?' but it wasn't a thought worth sharing. Soon enough someone would probably come by to tell

them about what happened.

Gotouda Fuki came out of the house, walking with Yano Tae's support, into the police car. There was a call. The manager was the one who picked up. Holding the receiver, the funeral manager went pale, then announced to Fuki her own brother's death.

Since hearing it, Fuki's arms had been covered in goose bumps, ones that didn't fade even in the mid-day summer heat. Bystanders pat her hand seeking to offer her some comfort but none of it warmed her. How her brother died, the manager did not say and so Fuki did not know. She didn't couldn't help thinking that that was because the funeral manager was hiding it. She heard the sound of the patrol car. If the police were called, then there was no mistaking that it was an unnatural death. That sent goose bumps down her spine.

Yano Tae clung to the car.

"Fuki-san, it'd be better to leave it to somebody else! It's hard on you with your age!"

Looking up at the already tearful face of her longtime friend, Fuki remained her seat, fist a hard curl in her lap. The funeral manager seated next to her reached out to hold that hand, but it lacked a sense of visceral reality.

"It's all right.... he's, my brother, after all." As she spoke, she realized how much she was shaking. Her gaze was on Tae, but every nerve in her body was attuned to the police officer in the seat in front of her, and she knew it.

(If I don't calm down...)

The more she tried to clench her fist firmly, the more terribly they shook.

(If they see this, they'll think it's strange....)

"But, Fuki-san."

"....It's all right."

The officer sat wordlessly. She couldn't help thinking he was listening intently. Fuki put on no brave fronts, bowing her head low. At the same time, she closed the door and the car started moving. Fuki couldn't lift her head.

"There was a death, wasn't there? Your son, wasn't it?"

When the voice came from the front, she seemed to jump in her seat. She nervously lifted her face, turning her head to look at the middle aged officer in the passenger's seat; his eyes were boring into Fuki.

"Yes,... Yes, sir. My youngest son."

(Blood was...)

"My condolences, ma'am. That's a real shame. ---How old was he?"

"He was 39."

"Then, where are his wife or your grandchildren?"

"No, he was still single, so."

(Blood was.... his clothes...)

Fuki shook her head. "Is that so," said the officer, holding his tongue after that. From there, an eternity passed. Every hint of sound terrified her. Every time the officer took a breath, she felt he was on the verge of questioning her.

(Had your son gone to Yamairi recently?)

(Was your son acting unusual in any way after he returned?)

(Did he have blood on his clothing or anything like----)

But the officer had nothing more to say, the car didn't seem to be to bring Fuki anywhere for questioning, going to the family home in Yamairi. The officer stepped out of the car, as did Fuki with the funeral manager's support, when two sharp eyed men came up. This time for certain she'd be questioned, she thought, prepared. Prepared though she was, she was still surprised to be brought to her brother's house for questioning.

"Uhm, are you the family?"

"Where are Hidemasa-san and Mieko-san's children? Do you have their contact information?"

"Yes.... They have two. Both have moved a long ways out, but if you'd like their contact information, then at my house, I...."

The two men who seemed to be detectives nodded and took notes. They asked several more questions but nothing in particular regarding blood

splotches came out. Relief washed over and wore her out. They brought her to the living room to sit and asked if anything seemed to be missing but still nothing about any blood stains. That he'd met with Mieko, that he'd gone to Yamairi to pay a get-well visit to Hidemasa, and that he'd returned with blood on his clothing never did come out in the open.

Part 8

Seishin looked up at the community warmed by the sun's rays from the shade of the fir trees.

The resonance of the cicadas' chirps echoed along the slope of the mountain. Two-toned colored cars were stopped here and there on the street by the Murasako family home. Like on TV or a movie, Seishin thought. The sight of those cars and the investigators was dreadful, enough to disconnect from one's sense of reality.

The first to rush on scene was the resident officer, Takami, and as he explained the situation to Takami, pointing out the various calamities, the prefectural police arrived. He did the same with them, going back over the incident and story, leading along the paths he took and giving the explanations again but once that was over, there was nothing left for him to do. He couldn't get used to it---feeling constrained with so many people flowing into the place, though he had no particular destination, he walked the roads of Yamairi. Just maybe, he thought, he had the feeling, that this could be for the last time.

Even in the abandoned houses near the Murasako household, there was the sight of officers looking at the porches and in the houses themselves. So he trudged down the road to Yamairi's entrance, sitting at the three-pronged road, watching over the neighborhood's manner of demise. Recognizing that Yamairi was dead, the clamor before his eyes would seem contrary but it bore resemblance to the service for Shuuji that he had just been at. ---Evidently, this was what a funeral service for a neighborhood looked like.

The road up from the village, from where Seishin was sitting just then, turned left to enter the neighborhood of Yamairi. To the right was a rather wide, empty space, and deep into that emptiness the village road continued on to the right. It was a mountain road that was pushing it to be as wide as even one truck but two lines of track marks continuing on the earth showed that the village road was still just barely alive.

The distinct tread-marks on the earth discolored by the blazing sun contrasted the summer grass, for an all the more summer like complexion. There must have been a spring in the far corner of the vacant lot as before a small hokora were muddied tracks in every direction, brightly colored butterflies gathered about seeking water. The hokora was so small it was merely an enclosure with a roof, storing a stone pillar and a sacred Jizo, but the latter was toppled, broken with the Jizo's head having rolled aside the mud tracks. Its red apron was last year's (and it was probably Mieko who had put it on him) or so. It was a lonely, faded color. The injured and exposed Jizo's head was surrounded by dragon flies, their wings gleaming like glass.

A neighborhood that had died out and the clamor of living beings, the voices of the cicadas and the birds, the vivid colors of summer and its vitality, intermingled there with death and ruin. Yamairi now could be thought of as being over-saturated in things until it would snap apart.

Becoming unable to bear looking at it, he sighed and rose. He climbed the hill being warmed by the sun and its reflections, walking without purpose along the road towards Gigorou's house. ---He'd thought about how he'd lost his head, if he did say so himself.

He lowered himself onto the stone steps down from the Ohkawa house's estates, sitting facing straight ahead to the Murasako house, idly seeing the patrol car stopped at the Murasako household, and beside it Fuki and two investigators talking.

"----Yo."

A voice called out to him from behind; he turned as Toshio came down the steps towards him. He looked towards the Murasako house with eyes narrowed against the glare, holding onto the railing of the steps and stopping in the shadow of a fig tree to light a cigarette.

"What a catastrophe, huh?"

Seishin subconsciously pursed his lips. From Gigorou's house, he immediately contacted Toshio. Per instructions, he'd searched for Gigorou but, without thinking he found himself wanting to blame Toshio for the state he found the old man in.

"I see Fuki-san is here. ...Is she all right?"

"With what?"

"The body... she identified it, right?" Seishin started to say, with a gurgling noise in the back of his throat. Unfortunately, he had nothing left to puke up.

Toshio shrugged.

"If it's that, I already took care of it. Old lady Murasako aside, the two old guys don't look like anything besides two old bodies. They'll probably have to be positively IDed by dental records."

Seishin nodded.

"It's this hot weather," Toshio said, looking up at the radiantly clear sky. "I don't know how long they've been dead but they were left like that in this heat wave. Well, it was a hell of a sight-seeing. Thanks to that, I still can't smell anything else."

Seishin nodded to that too. He was the same from only peering in through the doorway. There was probably no comparison to Toshio who had stood in during the autopsy.

"Why.... did that..."

"Don't ask me the cause of death. They brought in a crew to do the autopsy, you know," Toshio said with a wry smile around the cigarette still in his mouth. "But then, with a parts deficit like that, I wonder if they'll really be able to tell."

"Deficit?" Seishin asked, to which Toshio responded bluntly.

"I tried counting their parts but there's not enough."

Revived in his mind were Gigorou's remains scattered around the room. Since the bedroom had been similar to the way things were in the Murasako house's kitchen, he had thought that they were more animal remains.

"That's..."

"By the time they could round up all the wild dogs and dissect them, it'd probably be long digested."

"Then, what did that to Gigorou-san was..."

"Probably wild dogs. At least we know they weren't cut apart with anything bladed. Old lady Murasako at least didn't have any external injuries. They're saying it might have been a natural death."

That's good, Seishin murmured without thinking. Toshio turned to look at Seishin.

"That's good? That it's not a case?"

"Yeah, well. ...That was imprudent of me, wasn't it. Sorry."

"I wonder about saying that to me. S'nothing even a little good about it, though."

"It was a natural death right? At the least, for Mieko-san."

"That's just it," Toshio said throwing away his cigarette. "The two old guys died a few days ago. At the very least we know they didn't die just yesterday. Mieko-san on the other hand probably died right around yesterday precisely."

"That's..."

Seishin started to say, then closed his mouth. "Yesterday....?"

"Right," Toshio said with an ironic smile. "Isn't that interesting? Old lady Mieko was here, who knows how many days, living with a corpse, in other words."

Chapter 3 Translation Notes

General

Household/Family Shrines

- Come in Shinto and Buddhist flavors:

Family Shrines - *Kamidama* - Not just limited to roadsides, homes often have Shinto shrines meant to house gods as well. Charms known as Ofuda are stored in them and prayers are said at the house-bound shrine where offerings of food and drink are to be set out. An [example](#) of a household shrine from Yosokan Dojo, with the mirror being the object housing the god.

Family Altars - *Butsudan* - Much like the Shinto Family Shrine, the Buddhist Family Altar often has a stand-in object such as a Jizou or painting or scroll inside, and offerings are made to this one as well. While Family Shrines are hung like a high shelf, the Family Altars are more like cabinets, complete with doors. Also similar to the Family Shrines are that offerings are made here. Family Altars tend to have a bell that can be rang during litanies. An [example](#) from www.butudan.co.jp. Covering the main bits: **#12** is where the tablets honoring the dead are seen, and **#13** is the death register where the posthumous name, common name, and year of death are written. **#14** is where offerings are set.

Many homes have both. They're more common in rural areas than cities.

Japanese Funerals - A Brief Summary

The Family Altar is closed for 49 days. This is so that any other deceased family members may be included in the mourning, going without offerings until the deceased joins them, though offerings are left here for the deceased during that period. 49 days is said to be the amount of time it takes for the dead to cross to The Other Shore, with trials every 7 days they must overcome to release themselves and their ego and move onto a higher plane of existence. The Family Shrine is closed until the funeral is over.

A posthumous name

is given for the dead to use in the afterlife, so that they can further disassociate from their former existence. This name is based on their accomplishments and karma in life.

If the deceased died at home they're brought before the Family Altar where the readings and prayers take place. If the family wishes, this can still be done even if they don't die at home, even if it's not just immediately after the death as the normal bedside Sutras are. This is not quite the same thing as a wake, but it's functionally quite similar.

If the deceased dies out of the home, generally the medical staff (either at the hospital or who come to assess the body) will take care of preparing the bodies for the funeral. In other cases this is done by funeral home staff, morticians, monks, or others depending on the situation. The dead are dressed in traditional white kimonos, though sometimes men are put in black suits.

At the wake, the family is offered donations by guests, and each guest receives a gift for their attendance proportional to their donation (about 1/4th). Prayers, incense, and more Sutras. An all night vigil is held where the immediate family stays up all night, presumably being visited by the deceased who is saying goodbye to their favorite places and people in this world.

Then there's the funeral. More prayers, more Sutras, and they are often buried with money to cross the river to the other side, snacks, cigarettes, precious objects, etc then transported off to be cremated or, more unusually but definitively the case in Sotoba, buried.

After the 49 days, the gifts are sent to the mourners who gave donations, and mourning is basically finished, aside from memorial services held on specifically numbered years after the deceased's death. popular years are the 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 13th anniversary of deaths. Incidentally we're told in

[Seishin's essay](#)

that in Sotoba, mourning services cease after the 33rd year, when even their plot is no longer a plot, but a place where a fir is placed. These elements vary

depending on the specifics of the faith, like many other details. The elements described here are the bare-bones basics that are generally universal.

The family does not celebrate the Shinto celebrations for the rest of the year and do not send or receive New Years greeting cards. Astute readers and purveyors of Japanese culture will notice that Buddhism seems to be the religion of choice for death rituals, and Shintoism for most festivals and celebrations. A sharp teacher of mine in Japan remarked, in an extension of a common Japanese saying only involving Shintoism and Buddhism originally, that in Japan you are born Shinto, marry Christian, and die Buddhist. Shintoism is the religion of new lives and spirituality, Christianity is mostly opted for the stylish chapel weddings by those who may never care to read a page of a Christian bible in their life, and Buddhism focuses heavily on rebirth or not really being quite gone so much as journeying, making it particularly appealing for those struggling with a death in the family.

In case you're wondering what the Mourning Crew and Koike are doing in all of this, here is a handy

[checklist](#)

of all the tasks that must be performed for a funeral. Most of the more daunting ones are universal issues for most culture's funerals. They are essentially making these arrangements.

Juzu -

Prayer Beads used in Japanese Buddhism, their use is similar to a Catholic rosary with beads meant to keep track of counting the sutras while they are chanted. There is also the belief that the good karma leaking off from the chanting of sutras may reside in the juzu. Sutras are typically chanted 108 times as there are believed to be 108 attachments or afflictions that plague man. If more than 108 are to be chanted, some sects start going backwards around the ring of beads to signify breaking the cycle of death and rebirth. The shapes vary between sects as do the appropriate ways of holding them when in use. The formal, larger ones with 108 beads are typically two-ringed, with or without two to four smaller beads dispersed between them. Informal ones may have fewer

than 108, are a single ring, and have between 18 and 45 beads usually in some number that divides evenly into 108. Men's informal juzu tend to have larger but fewer beads, women more but smaller. The tassels also come in forms ranging from loose to braided to balled; the tassel style is largely a matter of taste. The appropriate way to hold them between the hands, over one hand, over both, beneath the thumbs, *etc.* varies by sect.

Examples of

[men](#) and [women's](#)

informal juzu from

<http://www.butsudanya.co.jp>

[Examples](#)

of holding/use styles by sect from Echo Sekizai.

Chapter 3 - 1

Equinoctial Week - The [aforementioned](#)

Higan or other shore was said in Buddhist lore to be set in the far west. At the Vernal (spring) and Autumn Equinox, the sun sets due west, and at these times they were said to be able to cross over from the other shore, and festivities or rituals similar to the aforementioned Bon are held throughout the week, honoring the dead's burial plots and family Buddhist family altars, leaving food and drink offerings to the dead and reading Buddhist sutras at grave sites. As these celebrations are a week long each time, they have those equinoxes at the center of the assigned weeks; March 21st and September 23rd. These times are right before the seasons change in Japan, making it very hot right after the March one and cold after the September one.

Chapter 3 - 4

Of course, back then they didn't quite have last names, but...

- Hirosawa mentioned that there were no last names in the

Edo period (1600s - late 1868)

. In the

Meiji Restoration

(1868) commoners were ordered to take on last names written with an approved set of kanji, but before that, they were the prerogative of samurai and aristocracy. Commoners were referred to with a descriptor of where they were from or what they did instead of their last names, with the particle "no" for "of", for example Maeda no Motoko, (Mae - before, da - field) would be "The Motoko who lives in front of the fields." Even with nobles, referring to them with their last name, the possessive no particle, and then their first name was common, coming out as "Taira no Munemori" to use the example of our previously mentioned Saitou Sanemori's master, which would be "Taira's Munemori." This is used in Shiki on occasion due to there being so many head families and branch families that it's simple to refer to people by their household, and it's translated in that style. Later you'll notice characters referring to Toshio as "Doctor of the Ozaki's." He's being called Ozaki no Sensei there, rather than Ozaki Sensei as usual.

Temples and Shrines Part II

- Village Administration (Murakata) and Parish Guilds (Miyaza)

The bakufu are the shogun's government. Shoguns were military generals who were supposed to be a representative of the Holy (under Shintoism) Emperor over the territories they maintained, but in practice the Shoguns truly did run things until the Meiji Restoration, which was the restoration of the Emperor to true power

Under the the bakufu there were those assigned to govern each village. These leaders were the

Village Administration

. The shogunate were strong supporters of and strongly supported by Buddhism, due to varying reasons for each end of the partnership. The Village Administrators assigned their roles were often Buddhist intellectuals of high social status (not priests or the like, though many Buddhist priests also had political status). Assignment varied throughout the ages from being bakufu

appointed to village elections.

Buddhist temples were often co-opted as government institutions before the Meiji Restoration. When the Emperor was returned to power (as opposed to being mostly ceremonial while military generals and shoguns were the true rulers) it was with the help of powerful Shintoists and Shintoist intellectuals, whom viewed the Emperor's line as sacred and his rule divine right. Thus Shintoism was instated as the national religion again and the Village Administrations' leaders who were previously in charge of Buddhist religious matters were superseded by Shintoists, called the

Parish Guild

or the Miyaza. They were the ones privileged to engage in Shrine rituals directly; at times, if there were no Shinto priest, they would be the ones to handle the holy relics or go into the areas lay people were not allowed in. Different roles were open to different people, by birth, by election, by status, *etc.* here as well. In some areas, the Village Administration's government control remained more or less unchanged beyond this, being more or at least as much a government institution as a Buddhist one. In some areas, the Parish Guilds took on more political power, owning land and businesses whose proceeds went to the temple, or to the Parish Guild in the name of the temple. The degree of coexistence, blending, or contest betwixt the groups varied as well as which prevailed.

Chapter 3 - 5

Shouji

- Sliding wood framed doors with paper rather than solid wood or other materials. If you've ever seen a traditional Japanese setting in a movie, anime, manga, etc., you've seen them, but here's a note in case you didn't know what they were called.

[Example](#)

from Wikimedia Commons.

Tatami

- Straw wound floor mats. Similarly, you've probably seen them, they're the most common Japanese home setting's flooring but in case you don't know what they're called, now you do. It's common to give room size descriptors by how many tatami mats it fits, with the standard tatami length being twice the width,

[Example](#)

from Wikimedia Commons.

Chapter 3 - 6

Hashimoto's Disease

- An autoimmune disease where the patient's own immune system attacks their thyroid, leading to hypothyroidism with bouts of hyperthyroidism. Generally treated with hormones replacing those the thyroid can't produce.

Ozaki is going to throw out a lot of medical terms throughout this series and right now I don't tend to translation note them all as they're not exactly a cultural matter unless you count medical culture, but Hashimoto's disease sounds terribly Japanese, even if it's not more particularly prevalent in Japan than anywhere else. If readers want me to summarize them rather than having to slog through a potentially technical Wikipedia article, I probably can, but I'll be sticking with technical terms in the text to the extent Japanese technical terms are used (it's usually him talking to other medical professionals). Despite how uneducated I seem, I am, at least in theory, involved in the investigation of crimes in medical facilities, so I'm unusually familiar with basic medical terminology for a blithering idiot otaku

Chapter 4

Part 1

He stared at the morning mist wavering above the asphalt.

The silent, chilled highway drew in from the west, with a wide winding turn towards the village entrance. The path out of the village crossed the bridge that saddled the mountain stream and headed south, beneath the expressway's overpass.

In the night a sudden unease took him. Feeling rushed by something in the night, unable to sleep, he listened to the radio, only for it to make him feel all the more like he was being cornered by those radio waves. Rolling about in his bed, unable to bear it, as soon as dawn broke he left the house. Unable to seize the mood of a casual stroll, his pace broke into a run, towards the national highway as if being pulled along by it.

A baseless irritation, impatience for something he himself couldn't name. The highway stretched out, chilled, wordlessly running southerly. He pondered its end. The road ran towards the city, piercing fields and hills, leaving the neighborhoods of the village behind. Even with the knowledge that the asphalt beneath his very feet connected this small mountain village to a bustling town, the adults about him spoke of it as his "future," so terribly detached from any present sense of reality.

Passing through one more today, tomorrows were piled up thick. He suspected the pile of tomorrows had approximately no relation to the "future" the adults spoke of, thinking that this road breathed into the reaches of eternity. Would this road really lead to the city if he walked along it? Even if he tried to imagine it, all he could see was his own figure being swallowed up in the morning mist.

Sometimes a truck would rush through shaking the silent stillness, passing him by and driving south as he saw it off, with some strange sense of restraint. It was a runaway's morning. Pressed by the feeling of having no place to have himself, but all the same having a hard time extracting himself from where he was, he idly waited for the sun to rise from the eastern mountain ridge. Soon enough with nothing else to do, with the languid voices of the cicadas as his impetus, just like always, with painful reluctance as if the hairs on his back were being pulled in protest, he turned back, the morning sun throwing vivid shadows over the western mountains behind him.

Casting his eyes down from the brilliant rays, he returned towards his house. He'd felt just a little like he'd be beaten down and at the same time relieved, a mystery to himself as much as anyone.

This morning once again he returned through the country paddy fields while gazing where his heart longed for. In the short time he had been at the highway, the village awoke. Even on a Sunday the village's early rising didn't change. The houses along the narrow pathway opened their windows, signs and presences of people about. The morning fog dispersed, the eastern mountain's shadow whittled away, and the sun shone strongly into his face as he walked north. ---Today'd be hot again.

As his eyes narrowed against the light, his hand shading over his eyes, a brown furball came flying beneath his feet. At the same time came a crisp voice.

"Taro!"

Turning to look back over his shoulder towards the voice, there she came rushing, holding onto a leash. The Shiba Inu frolicking at his feet had no collar. That would, then, be the ring that was dangling from the end of the leash she held.

"I am so sorry. ---Taro, come here."

Ritsuko was in a flustered hurry, seizing the dog whose tail wagged as if it would fall off. The Shiba, now too big to be called a puppy, was either over-excited or excessively healthy, refusing to stay in place in her arms even once caught. With the help of the one the dog had eagerly tripped up, at last the

collar was able to be fastened.

"I just changed his collar thinking it was too big but I wonder if it's still too loose? It came right off. Sorry, and thanks. ---Natsuno-kun, wasn't it?"

When Ritsuko spoke, he scowled. He suddenly turned away, silent, without any hint of small talk returned greetings, most unpleasant. Ritsuko thought that he must not have remembered her. They'd met at the hospital countless times. Even so, to him she was nothing more than one of the nurses, and perhaps he couldn't differentiate between each of them.

"Out jogging? Your leg's all better now?"

The question came as much because he was in a T-shirt and jersey as because it would end on a bad note to separate with greetings going the way they had.

She was certain that he was a patient who had come in quite some time ago with a knot on his shin. It was a common ailment of growing boys. It would usually take care of itself during the growth period and in his case he'd come in for prescriptions of pain killers but not since then, so the pain must have stopped, too.

"..... My leg is better. There was some weird bump under my knee, though."

"The cartridge hardened. Then, it must have stopped hurting," Ritsuko said, Natsuno giving a sour nod. Thinking she wasn't making any ground, she was just about to say her goodbyes when Natsuno himself spoke up.

"Uhm, Nurse?"

"Mm?"

"Once you get that kind of lump in your bone, you're finished growing I heard but is that true?"

There was something charming about how seriously he asked. In a hurry to move onward, Taro pulled her two, three steps forward, Natsuno following awaiting his answer.

"They do say that.... but there's nothing set in stone about it." Being pulled into a walk by the dog Taro, she went with no destination, Natsuno at her side.

"It is true. When the cartridge ossifies, that is the sign that it's finished growing, yes. But, just because you're past the phase of growing as quickly as you did in middle school, it doesn't mean that your growth has come to a complete stop, so...."

"I see..." It was funny, how complicated his thoughts sounded as he spoke. At the same time he sounded relieved.

They had met at the hospital two or three times but beyond that Ritsuko had caught sight of him who knew how many times during an early morning walk. Natsuno was looking at the national highway. The sight of the boy standing and longing, as if yearning for the south, made it seem as if any minute he'd start off on foot out of the village. She had the urge to call out to him, as if she had to stop him but, at the same time if she called out to him, it seemed like that would be what drove his back forward towards the south, and so she couldn't. --That image was so powerful that the fact that he was quite worried about whether he'd grow any more or not like a normal young man, knowing such a trivial thing could be on his mind, was somehow a relief.

"Natsuno-kun is entering high school this year, was it?"

"Yes ma'am. ... Could you please stop that." The young boy's voice was blunt, his displeasure naked.

"Mm?"

"Calling me by my first name."

Ah,

Ritsuko nodded.

Should she call him by his last name Yuuki or his last name Koide? His father's last name was Yuuki and his mother's last name was Koide. The couple weren't together in the family register, and he was under his mother's name. So she thought it had been Koide on his insurance card. Around the hospital he was known by his first name, Natsuno. What to call somebody with two last names was a conundrum for anybody; it may have been the office's Mutou, who was friends with his father Yuuki, who had called him that.

"You hate it? Your name."

Natsuno nodded with a sour face.

"I think it's a good name, though. It's fresh. Your mother gave it to you, right?"

"My old man. I guess it's some noble's name."

"I see. Your father, he's a Romanticist."

Natsuno grimaced. "If he wasn't he we wouldn't have moved, not to a place like this."

"It is a simple, empty country village, after all," Ritsuko said with a smile, making Natsuno bow his head in sudden shame.

"I didn't... really mean it like that."

"Even if you did mean it like that, isn't it fine? It's the truth after all."

---It's like the stock model of the sticks, out here.

Yes, it's been called that. That's just what it is.

---In the last few years of its life, it feels like. It isn't any place for the young.

(That it is not.)

Ritsuko looked out over the village. The V shape carved into the mountain ridges could be seen as open scissor blades. Like it would someday suddenly snap shut, squashing out the village and its people.

"That's right.... It really is a simple country town. To those like your father, who always lived in the city, it might be thought of as curious, in a good way, but..."

"There's a shortage of nurses isn't there, right now?"

"Hm? Well, maybe."

"Then, I do not think you would have trouble finding work no matter where you went. Don't you think of leaving here and going to the city or something?"

"That's true...."

The early rising elderly recognized Ritsuko and called out to her. There were

those watering their gardens, those cleaning the street, and children passing by calling out to her in bright voices as they hurried down the road. On Sunday there were no radio exercises, so they must have been going off to play.

"I guess it's because I was born here."

'Morning!' called out a voice from behind before passing by on her bicycle; it was Hirosawa Mayumi. She waved her hand at the both of them and continued off in the same direction as the children, to the north. She was going to work, no doubt.

Hirosawa Mayumi was from the Shimo-Sotoba's Ohkawa household who married into the Hirosawa household---the one called Kohiro or Small Hiro. She used to work at the Mizobe credit union but since marrying, she worked at the register at the super market, Tamo, at the top of the shopping district. She was the third generation, with no kids yet herself. ---Ritsuko was like that, well informed about the various tidbits of the village.

What functions and events were for which seasons, who did what during them, who was from what family and how they were related by marriage. Even while she wasn't especially interested in it, she would naturally hear it, and without trying to remember it, she remembered. Lately her job only spurred that on. Working as a nurse in the village's only hospital, she ended up knowing things down to the finest detail, becoming more and more at ease and familiar. Whenever she walked down the street, there would always be an incessant stream of voices calling out to her.

"With acquaintances and the like and friends and the like, and all those different relationships in place, I guess I just can't get in the mindset to decide where else to live."

"Or where to have a boyfriend?"

At Natsuno's playful question, she gave a light glower. "That isn't a part of it."

"Even though it's really inconvenient...."

"I don't know of any place more convenient, so I don't think of it as inconvenient."

She laughed, but Ritsuko supposed that he could want out of the village.

Natsuno moved to Sotoba during middle school, so being raised in the city, wanting to return to the place he was used to living was perhaps if anything only natural.

"I don't get it. Is it that 'wherever you live's the center of everything' thing? If we're talking about merits, there isn't anything to brag about either. The firs or the sotoba...."

That's right,

Ritsuko nodded.

---It's like some kind of bad omen, huh? It's eerie.

If you were speaking of Sotoba the village out loud it was going to be heard as an ill-omened word. Everyone here had been teased about it at least once by the kids in school from other towns. But, that woodworking had become less prominent. At one time Sotoba may have stood as a base for building coffins and the like but nowadays the elderly's only manual labor was crafting sotoba. Even the number who did that was decreasing. As woodworking declined, what rose were agriculture and forestry, and most of the households with a family monopolized trade were in decline, to the point where most households had secondary jobs.

Ritsuko's household was one of those stock Sotoba families, her widowed mother tilling their narrow field, with Ritsuko and her little sister working to supplement the family budget. ---No, if you were being precise, now it was Ritsuko who supported the household economy. Her mother's harvests were only enough for one household, and what they came up short on her little sister's income supplemented.

Ritsuko let out a sigh for no particular reason, turning her eyes towards the western mountain. The slope was covered in firs, at the foot a small opening of fields. Amidst the forest of firs catching the light was a rain gutter or something similar on the Kanemasa mansion.

"...That house, they never did move into it, did they."

Ritsuko murmured, Natsuno turning to look at it dubiously.

"That house?" He parroted Ritsuko's line of sight, letting out an 'ah.' "---The

Kanemasa house."

That building must have inspired her in some way; there was recently talk about wanting to rebuild the house a lot. Ritsuko's family was an old farming family. There were an excess of rooms and the aging fixtures were undeniably inconvenient. Reconstruction would be a welcome change but if it came to doing actual refurbishing, that task would fall on Ritsuko.

(Even though she should know better.)

Her father died early, and her mother left the forests untended, unable to even cultivate the field that wasn't that broad in the first place. Their savings, if there were enough to call savings, weren't enough for a family. Her mother should not have been unaware of that. ---Her mother demanded a family of Ritsuko.

---If you got out of this old tedious village, you'd feel better.

So get married, she was told. She didn't hate the idea of marrying her partner, and of course it wasn't that she didn't want to be married. She herself knew that if she let this chance get away from her, she wouldn't ever be able to wed.

(But...)

Then why couldn't she work up the determination to do it? Ritsuko's mother wanted her to leave the village behind, restart the family elsewhere and look after her for the foreseeable future. She herself may have even wished to do that. But, her mother's clear expectations were a weight on her chest. Thinking about that made her want to flee but, if she ran away then next her sister would be bound to the role. Thinking of that wrought the same weight in her chest. If she were to run away with a partner who said 'that village' with such scorn, all the more so.

"Now that you mention it, my old man was saying he'd seen a moving truck. On the day of the mushiokuri."

"That's right, Natsuno-kun's father performed as a yuge-shuu, didn't he?"

Mm, Natsuno nodded. "On the night of the mushiokuri as they were burning the Betto, he was saying they saw a moving truck. But, it turned back. They must've taken the wrong road."

Mm,

Ritsuko nodded.

Being pulled along by Taro as she was, she found herself at the riverbed road that lead to the highway. She thought that maybe Natsuno was coming back from this highway himself but, having a feeling she shouldn't touch that topic, she didn't dare to ask. The highway stretched in from the west here to where it intersected with the riverbed road, drawing out into a large curve that went south. This was the southern boundary of the village.

"Natsuno-kun, thirsty?"

"I didn't bring my wallet."

"It's my treat. When I come with my little sister, I always end up treating her."

Ritsuko laughed, stepping up to the vending machine in the Chigusa parking lot which was just around the corner. Chigusa was the commonly known name of the drive-in, ran by Yano Kanami with one other working girl. How old Kanami was, what kind of person---Ritsuko knew all of that about her. It didn't matter that she had a ten year age difference from Kanami, and that Kanami was rarely ever a patient at the hospital.

After putting the coins into the coin slot of the vending machine in the drive-in parking lot that faced the road, Ritsuko took out the cold can. Putting in the coins for Natsuno, she opened her can looking out over the road that swept by the village. On the other side of the highway, not far off she could see the bus stop. The empty but stop looked to be deserted.

Progression and decay---change did continue in the village without end. Only, the village was left behind from the outside world, the distance from the world beyond growing. That's how Ritsuko thought of it. A far off world, a deserted village. This village, too, would not necessarily always remain. The young left. The old died. Little by little becoming a smaller, more forlorn existence, all while being left behind alone.

"The Murasako's Obaa-chan... passed away, didn't she?"

"Murasako--in Yamairi? Yesterday, three corpses were found in Yamairi I heard, but." Natsuno asked, pulling the pull-ring of the can.

"Yup. But, just the other day, she was at the hospital. She came to pick up the Ohkawa's Ojii-chan's medicine for him. She seemed very healthy, and yet now, with everyone gone, it's strange."

Long ago--when the village was formed and still crafting sotoba, the villagers did their logging from Yamairi, bringing the trees down to the riverbed road by horse to Monzen. In Monzen, the firs were cut into lumber, then further cut down into sotoba. When Ritsuko was a child, there were lumber saw mills and carpentry shops here and there in the village. Those carpentry shops faded one by one, and entry to Yamairi also became less common. With the mere three elderly inhabitants left dead, the neighborhood Yamairi was extinguished. Was that how Sotoba too would at last disappear? She wondered. There would be fewer people, they'd take out the bus stop, only a few people would still make their homes there and, one fateful day, someone would try to pay a visit and they would all be dead. ---Sotoba's end. Was that day coming?

"Nurse," Natsuno spoke up. "Is it true that the three in Yamairi were murdered?"

Ritsuko blinked awake from her reverie. "Oh no. It's turned into a murder story?"

"That's just what I heard."

"The doctor said they died a natural death. They did an autopsy didn't they? He stood in for the autopsy. It was some kind of sickness, he said there wasn't any particular crime."

"What?" Natsuno smiled cynically. "I thought as much."

"Thought as much?"

Natsuno shrugged his shoulders. "Some freak went in, it sounds like some people are saying. But, I didn't think that could happen. I mean, you wouldn't normally think people were living that far back in this backwoods place, not normally."

Ritsuko blinked. "That may be right."

"When I heard there's a place at the end of the forest road where there're still people living, I thought it was a lie. I couldn't believe it. I thought it was one

thing to be living out here where there's not even a train and all but the buses don't even run to Yamairi!"

"Is that right... that is right. We know about Yamairi but people from outside might think like that."

"People who don't have anything to do with the village coming in here worked up would be weird in itself. If they did come into the village all the way to the top, they'd think the road ends there, wouldn't they? They wouldn't think there were houses beyond that where people lived and all."

"That... may be true."

"So then, there's no choice but to think the culprit is a villager, is there? But, if there was someone as dangerous as that, everyone'd know. It's that kind of place."

"That's true."

"Everyone keeps watch on each other, collecting every last detail around here."

At Natsuno's voice which seemed to be muttering to himself, Ritsuko's gaze fell with a forced smile.

Right---it might look that way. To someone from the outside.

(This old tedious village)

If you got out, you'd feel better.

(.....Even so.)

The people she knew well, the village that had become so familiar with her and she with it. Leaving that village, to a town where she knew no one. Relying on a person who could not grasp how she missed it. ----To Ritsuko, it didn't even seem possible.

When she raised her gaze, Natsuno gripped his can, looking south. It was possible that Ritsuko would become like that too. Standing at the highway at the break of dawn longing for Sotoba; it wasn't a life she wanted.

"Lately there aren't many families that make sotoba anymore are there?

Even though I love that smell."

Natsuno turned and blinked. "The smell? The firs?"

Ritsuko nodded.

"I love that smell of the firs. Don't you think it has a certain austerity to it?"

"Isn't that just because you know it's the smell of making sotoba?"

"Probably. ... Yes, it's the smell of nostalgia, remembering the dead." Ritsuko said, something cheerful in her mood as she looked up to the sky. "---All right, we'll use firs to build the new house!"

"New house?" Natsuno looked up at Ritsuko in bewilderment, Taro too looking up blankly.

"Yup! We're rebuilding. Our current house, it's pretty old now."

Ritsuko smiled and looked down at Taro.

"Taro, we're going back. ---Do you want a new dog house, too?"

"Whoa."

As her son's voice rose up in the living room, Tanaka Sachiko turned from the kitchen to look at him.

The kitchen was one step down from the four and a half tatami mat living room. The floor was technically covered in boarding planks but it was still ultimately called a dirt floor. The hard packed clay floor around the kitchen door spread wide, and there was a washing machine in the corner. Previously there was the furnace opening for the bath in that space. Next to the washing machine could be seen the door to the bathroom, all remnants of an old fashioned house fixture. Sachiko's house was built by an old farming family and left that way. She'd thought many times about how she'd like to rebuild it but her husband's parents suffered a long illness and thanks to that they didn't have that much of a savings surplus to afford it.

"Hey, Yamairi got a mention!"

Sachiko's son turned his body to face her from the living room, pointing to the

newspaper. Making a noise of interest, Sachiko stopped washing to bend down and see, taking a seat on the step between the living room and kitchen levels. "So that's what today's patrol cars were for."

"Heeh..."

Sachiko's eyes passed over the small---to the point where it was just page filler--article to know the cause of the prior day's uproar. It seemed like some people had died in Yamairi, or so she had heard rumors of yesterday at least but of course she didn't know any particulars.

"Oh but, they're saying it wasn't like it was a crime or anything, aren't they?"

"We don't know that." Her son Akira said with a somehow expectant tone. When she agreed, her tone was colored with the same tone.

"What's wrong?"

The girl who appeared in the living room tilted her head. Akira happily pointed to the newspaper

"Kaori, Yamairi got a mention!"

"Don't you mean Onee-chan?" Sachiko said, folding the paper. "Kaori, are you going out?"

"Yup. I thought I'd take Love along swimming."

"Instead of that, let's hit Yamairi!" Akira stood up. "Sure has been a while since I've been to the mountains."

"Now stop that." Sachiko glared at her son. Akira had just entered middle school and still showed no signs of calming down. He was always saying childish things. "Three people just died, it's a bad omen. You'll be taken up by an Oni."

"That's retarded. ---Hey, Kaori, let's go."

Sachiko gave Akira a light, small poke. "If you have that much free time, then do your homework. You still have some to finish yet, don't you? --Kaori, watch your step. The water level's low, so the riverbed is slippery."

"Kay."

"It's fine to take the dog to play in the water but don't let him roll around there. If he bathes in that water, he'll come back dirtier than he left."

Seishin took in the sun's scorching rays as he headed towards the neighborhood of Kami-Sotoba. Gotouda Shuuji's funeral went as planned. The chief mourner, Fuki, was the sister of the deceased Murasako Hidemasa but she married out of the Murasako household. The ill fates of the Murasakos were ultimately the burdens of the Murasako family, the Gotouda family being a separate entity, and more than anything it was summer so Shuuji's burial needed to be hurried. The Murasako couple's corpses were taken away for an autopsy, when they would return unknown. Thus for the time being the burial went as planned, though the mourners' interest was not on Shuuji but in the community of Yamairi.

"No matter how old they were, three people, all at once is, well..."

"Didn't some lunatic kid come in from Mizobe or something? It's become such a dangerous world."

"You said it. I mean, I myself have never locked my doors since the day I was born. I wonder if this isn't a sign of the end of that era?"

"I mean just a little while ago wasn't there talk of that outsider who ran over a child?"

Seishin was in a separate room but due to it being summer time the sliding screens and shouji were pulled back. All of the mass' conversations leaked through.

In any case, circumstances being what they were, speculations were flying. It seemed the villagers were largely thinking of it as a crime. A thief or possibly a madman was the culprit. If so then the perpetrator was not a villager but without a doubt someone from outside. ---That was the village's "common sense" at work.

'Weren't they attacked by some mountain dogs?' came the slightly more peaceable explanation, popularly given amongst a few of the elderly who even now entered the mountains for forestry.

"They're really multiplying up there you know. Another housing district was

built near Mizobe. Those fellas abandon their dogs in the mountains."

"To make sure they don't come home, they drive them all the way out here to abandon them. And not puppies or old dogs either. The point is they got tired of taking care of it or something, they're unmanageable, so they bring them out here."

"The Inoda's Motosaburou-san, wasn't it? The guy that horrible mess happened to in early spring. In Yamairi."

"Right, right. That guy's mountain was to the east of Yamairi and all. That's where he was attacked by a mountain dog, a hell of a scene. The dog that attacked him, too, they were saying it was one of those what're they called, a big western breed dog. One of those long haired ones you see in pet shops. Dogs go in and out of fashion like anything else, those bunch from the city throw them out once they're not fashionable anymore."

Seishin inclined his ears towards the voices he could hear amongst the clamor. While saying it was mountain dogs, the cause of those mountain dogs was ultimately not the village itself but the outside. Middle-aged women gossiped about whether it wasn't a double suicide. They lived alone in the mountains as they were, with no relatives to rely on. They were left in the middle of the mountains to be ruined by illness or age, and unable to suffer that they committed suicide, or perhaps Murasako Mieko was at her wits end and a forced double suicide took place; there were such explanations of that as well. And this was caused by government administrative deficiency, of a social welfare deficiency, or the children who had treated them cruelly and left the village, of course it was not caused by anything within the village.

The village was isolated from the outside world. The village rejected the outside world, you could even say. Like this they discussed from various angles the idea of "death intruding from the outside world" and yet, oddly enough, regardless of the explanations offered by Seishin and Toshio, that it was neither an incident nor an accident, the opinion that it was a natural death, was, as if the possibility never existed, not given so much as a breath.

Yes---"that" always came from outside of the village. What really came was not something that came from the town of Mizobe, nor from any of the

neighboring communities, it came from much further---no, not from the city beyond the bypass, either. It came from what was not a part of the village, from the firs that surrounded the village within them. The forest of firs were not a part of the village, they were outside of it. "That" was within the firs, coming into the village from outside to seize the villagers. It took the villagers to the boundary line outside the village, towards the border between life and death.

(.....Shiki.)

Ohkawa Tomio expressed his outrage to the drinkers at the corner counter of the liquor shop.

"Suddenly, there's a phone call saying that my uncle's dead. When I hurry on up there in a rush, it's not a sight a man should see. Sure enough I was told that it was my uncle but, even if you tell me that there's no way I could know. The man was rotted on top of being in pieces!"

The old men at the counter's faces, red with inebriation, all scowled at once.

"He wasn't just rotted from heat. Maggots were crowded in there, I take a look at the old man's face and I thought I was looking at bone it was so white. Just when I'm thinking that it's moving, I realize it's the maggots gathered in his face." He continued on with grand exaggerations, planting the seeds of nightmares in all those around. "On top of that, in the empty houses all over and from my uncle's house, seems there were torn up bits of rabbits or dogs found scattered around. Spots of blood were all here and there to. They had to have gotten mixed up with some punk from somewhere who was off in the head. Not a doubt he killed old man Gigorou and the Murasako couple then flew the coup. The cops are all saying shit about it being wild dogs, but I say like hell!"

As Ohkawa Atsushi heard his father's coarse voice rise up the stairs, he nursed a complex feeling. Throwing himself down on the bed atop the tatami mats, he scowled at the ceiling.

(Someone went to Yamairi...) Dead bodies and torn apart animals, a blood stained house. (...hunting.)

Atsushi tried to draw such a mental image looking at the ceiling above. Blood, entrails, corpses. The sinews of muscles frayed, somehow made his blood boil.

Murderer, weapon, mayhem. Corpses and blood. Something pooled in the pit of his stomach, an itchy impatience making him feel as if he were wavering. Somehow, he felt like he could neither stay there nor stand to go.

"Damn... there's no way to blow off some steam..."

If he went to the recently emptied Yamairi and recklessly crashed the whole joint, maybe this inexplicable feeling would blow away with that steam. But, thought Atsushi. When he snuck into Kanemasa to do the same thing, when the time came, Atsushi was seized with fear and ran away. Remembering that, something bitter from the depth of his stomach rose. What if he ended up stuck in the role of the schmuck doing something like that again?

There was a pause in his father's gruff voices, and when it continued it shouted up to the second floor.

"Hey, Atsushi, a delivery!"

People passed through to get to the village. People filled their ears up with information and came jogging back as if to return before it leaked out, bursting from their mouths from the intense internal pressure. Yet regardless, when the local Takami stopped by to pay a visit, they kept their mouths tightly shut. The only one to proactively open his mouth was Katou Kyouzuke.

"A lot of people died in Yamairi, right? I know who did it."

At the sound of the child's voice, Takami turned his body as Kyouzuke distinctly pointed towards the western mountain.

"It's that house. That place is full of demons, they did it."

His grandmother Yukie quickly covered his mouth.

"Don't say things like that. ---I'm sorry for him. That curious house was built and he's just completely convinced it's a haunted house."

"It's true..." Kyouzuke added with a whisper, but it seemed the adults weren't listening. True, Kyouzuke once again quietly repeated before he closed his mouth.

Part 2

"Oh, it's the Junior Doctor!"

Toshio turned towards the voice calling out from the side of the parking lot to see three women standing and talking. Standing under the bowers beside the gate to avoid the sun's rays, they fanned themselves with their handkerchiefs while seeming to make lively gossip. Thinking it'd be a pain, Toshio picked up his pace towards the car. Either way their topic was obvious.

The bells chimed from the mountains. The sounds of funeral bells. He managed to escape to the inside of his car, avoiding the women standing and chatting but the seat was scorching hot, leaving Toshio thoroughly demoralized and worn down to the bone all the same.

The tragedy in Yamairi had the people of the village all wound and worked up. They gathered here and there, seemingly to solidify their theories. They must have heard from somewhere or another that Toshio stood in on the autopsy, and thanks to that despite it being his no-consultation day, he had plenty of patients. Making a face like it was entirely natural they requested examinations, and on top of that he had plenty of requests for house calls. And when asked what they wanted to ask about there, it wasn't about the one calling him in, it was commentary on the Yamairi incident. Even though he cut into the words of and shut up the patients who wanted to make idle chatter, there was no end to the patients to see. To put it bluntly he was fed up with them.

With that in mind, being beaten down by the smoldering heat in the car, Toshio headed towards Mizuguchi. Down the village road to the south, the long and narrow village community stretched out on the opposite bank. Just across that bridge was Mizuguchi.

In the lowest reaches of Mizuguchi, in a narrow farm field and amongst the forests that were so thick it couldn't even be called part of the village anymore was a miserable little hovel, Itou Ikumi's house. Calling it a miserable little hovel was by no means an invalid statement. The old building was so worn by the

years that at a glance anyone would think anything so laid to waste was abandoned. The warped and slanted roof's tiles were broken and the sheet iron planks that handled the rain runoff were rusted and spotted with holes. It was questionable whether it could even open, the window with the wooden frame's glass so filthy that it couldn't even fulfill its function as glass. The glass door to the entryway was lurching open, an old fashioned electric light with a broken shade hanging down from above, the light bulb ever unlit.

"Good day."

Toshio stepped inside past the glass door, calling out. Inside was a dim dirt floor, the air heavy with heat, enough to choke someone easily with the strong odor of incense floating about. The dirt floor of the entryway continued to the other side, straight ahead, the depths of which from the daughter of the Ikumis Tamae poked her face out. She was about three years Toshio's senior but with a face seeming to be worn out, she'd aged to the point where one could think she'd lapped him.

Tamae's eyes seemed somehow hollow as she spoke her gratitude for the house visit, thank you for coming all this way. Chunky and rotund, Tamae being the very picture of lethargy was how Toshio had always remembered her being, as far back as his memory could go. Just as Tamae was raising her face from her bow, a voice resonated from within the house.

"Is it the doctor? Come in."

Toshio nodded in acknowledgement to Tamae, heading in past the dirt floor. Beyond the open glass door, in the six mat corner of a room like a cellar, before the kitchen entrance, there was a thin futon spread out. On that sat a woman. This was Tamae's mother, Ikumi.

"By all means, do come in."

A smile rose up over Ikumi's whole face, thin in contrast to that of her daughter's. Toshio withheld the sigh he felt inside as he came up into the six mat room. He narrowly managed to squeeze himself into an opening on the tatami to sit. The reason for such minimal space was because of the tools of the family trade. There was enough to cram up half of the room, counting neither the family altar nor the family shrine, before which was a stand with an incense

burner large enough to be mistaken for a brazier, in it incense sticks burning, smoking the room in dark soot, and there were two shelves with a strange luster to them, lined with ambiguous, cryptic little objects coated in dust.

Toshio drew his eyes from that and professionally took out his medical bag. "What's wrong?"

"Since yesterday, I've been so hot."

So Ikumi said but her face was brimming. At the very least she seemed healthier than anyone else he'd met today.

"Your temperature?" Toshio asked, taking out a thermometer. He knew full well from experience this household didn't have medical thermometer. Ikumi frequently requested house calls but she'd never even put out a cushion to sit on, nor served a single cup of tea. He was pretty sure there weren't any cushions for guests to sit on in the house anyway. He had his doubts about whether there were even teacups for guests' use.

Ikumi cheerfully took the thermometer in hand and put it in her armpit. As Toshio took her pulse and blood pressure readings, talk of Yamairi began. How she was surprised by the patrol cars rushing by Takemura, how surprised she was when she heard a just dreadful case occurred in Yamairi, personal criticisms on the Murasako couple and old man Gigorou, she went sounding off on all such things. Ikumi had a tendency to be a tight lipped and gloomy woman but at the very least towards Toshio, she burst out a flood of words as always. He mechanically put the stethoscope to her.

Ikumi was a famous miser. Even in this day and age she used firewood from the mountains in a wood burning stove, and she used the neighbor's baths for hot water. Though she was loath to spend a single yen, she frequently called Toshio out for house calls. He had a theory that her reasoning may have been colored by her hang-ups about doctors--or maybe about the household known as 'Ozaki'---that if you went to the hospital for an examination, they'd examine things that didn't need to be examined charging unnecessary medical fees, so she probably believed. In any case, having come, there wasn't really a thing wrong with Ikumi. Every time something happened in the village, she'd call Toshio out and on the rare occasion there was something wrong, she'd refuse

medicine and treatment. Of course, she had no insurance. The mother and child farmed a narrow field and garden, and the rest that they ate was at the generosity of others.

Toshio performed a perfunctory examination, and merely answered that there was nothing particularly abnormal.

"Is that so? How strange, I do feel ever so sluggish," Ikumi said, suddenly turning with a 'by the way!' "Seems Gotouda-san's Shuuji-san has passed away, yes? I wonder if that hasn't got some connection to Yamairi?"

"Connection?"

"I mean, isn't it strange, so many dead people in succession like that. And moreover, Shuuji-san was Murasako's Hidemasa's nephew, wasn't he? Makes you wonder if there's something to it, doesn't it? And the Murasako family, it was down to just Hidemasa wasn't it? Hidemasa-san and Fuki-san were the only two left but there were originally five siblings you know, from that house. And yet, three of them died young. On top of that, Mieko-san's last child was a stillbirth, too...."

Toshio packed away his stethoscope, breathing a sigh. "You're not trying to say it's a curse again, now are you?"

"Oh dear," said Ikumi as if shocked. "I just mean, isn't it curious? That three people of the same stock died in succession."

"Gigorou-san died too, you know."

"Gigorou-san was like a part of the family to the Murasako household. I wonder if he might not have been a victim of circumstance, you know?."

"What circumstances are we talking about? Try not to make it sound too stupid."

"I thought that the Junior Doctor would say as much but the truth is, I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"The truth is, what was it, ten days ago now? I saw a strange dream. A pitch black cloud over Yamairi. That was all there was to the dream but it struck a chord in me. That something no good is going to come to Yamairi."

"It's just a dream. ---Well, see ya."

Toshio said as he said that while rising to a stand when Ikumi gripped at him. She clung to him with her full body weight hanging off of him, not about to let go easily.

"Ikumi-san."

"I knew. I was certain that unhappiness would befall Yamairi. Then, after Shuuji-san, there was that uproar. Be sure, something happened at the Murasako house. Back when I was young, there's something I told Mieko-san. I told her that family is no good, you, in entering into the family like that, will not meet an easy end, I told her. But still, Mieko-san is a person who won't open her ears when people speak. And then there was that dream, wasn't there? It struck a chord with me but, I didn't want to have weird faces made at me again. So I stayed quiet then but, knowing and doing nothing doesn't feel very good now does it? So you see, I did a special prayer, a prayer that nothing bad would befall the Murasako household. As I did, in the very middle of prayer, a gecko appeared, twice no less!"

"Okay," Toshio said curtly, trying to pry her grip off but once he got the right hand off, her left took hold.

"This is no good, I thought! That isn't all, either. Look, I've been saying it all along haven't I? This year something's strange! When I read New Year's fortunes, I had a bad premonition, did I not? Then we had this heat and this drought! On top of that, as soon as the year began, I had a bad feeling from that Kanemasa house. I've felt like it's stagnant with evil. For a while now I thought that stagnation's been flowing towards Yamairi. And then there's that precognitive dream, yes? I thought it wasn't good that the Kanemasa estate was sold. That solidified the feel of the village for the worst. To begin with, Kanemasa is what you would call a fated lot, after all. "

"Ikumi-san, you do know I don't have the time to be listening to your pretentious rants?"

"Oh, just listen, I'm not saying anything bad. That house at Kanemasa, it's not good. That house's direction is no good. The position of the gate is strange, isn't it, it wasn't a good idea to build over the old Kanemasa house. At least they

should have set it like it was before. I thought about going to tell them that, I went to visit, but there's nobody there to visit now is there? Be sure of it, it's bad luck. I'd even bet on it. They had plans to come but some misfortune befell them, so they weren't able to move in. It's not impossible, that house, they build it to move in."

"Ikumi-san."

"I'm not finished yet. You go ahead and just see if anybody really moves into that house. Worse things'll come to pass if they do. Junior Doctor, did you know? Near here are statues of the three wise monkeys, aren't there? They were broken, the other day. Right around the time the three died in Yamairi, that it was. When I thought about it and went to look, the O-jizo-san and the Koubou-sama statue in front of the Shrine were broken too. Its head was knocked off and it was torn to pieces. If you listen, you'll hear them talking about how Gigorou-san's body was torn to pieces too, yes? There's a connection there, don't you think as much?"

"Personally I can't help but think there's no connection at all, but," Toshio said coldly tearing Ikumi's hand off. "Anyway, there's nothing especially wrong with you, so. If possible, before calling me in you could try thinking a little more rationally about how bad you're really feeling?"

Oh my, Ikumi scowles at Toshio. "I am quite rational, I will have you know. It seems you don't believe what I'm saying. However, ever since I'd seen that strange, precognitive dream, I've been feeling dreadful. I think it's clear I've been in contact by something ominous. I've been like that ever since then, really."

"Sure," Toshio said dismissively as he stepped down onto the dirt floor. He desperately wished never to have to pay Ikumi another house call examination again but he was certain he'd be called in again. If Ikumi called in directly there were times when he could try to turn her down, passing it off by asking how she was doing over the phone. But, without fail if the phone call came from her daughter Tamae, if he refused the house call, she'd break out into crying hysterics. After being rejected, she'd whine cloyingly until eventually, she'd be winded and collapse; it'd come to the point before where Tamae herself would have to be brought in by ambulance. Toshio's father had a certain antipathy

towards the mother-daughter pair, a vein popped out in anger but, even still his patience would be worn down and, in the end, even while hot with rage, he'd head out. It was unfortunately likely that Toshio, likewise, was going to be pulled into the same pattern.

Leaving behind Ikumi who appeared to still have something to say, he briskly went to the dirt floor entryway. Coming from the room beside the entryway, Tamae bowed her head. What she held out towards him was a used direct mail envelope, so he knew that inside was the fixed fee, from years of knowing them.

"Thank you...." Tamae said with a shrinking voice. Toshio took the envelope with a sigh.

"It's not that I don't get how hard it is on you, Tamae-san, but can I ask you not to call me over things like this? While I'm doing things like this, there are patients who really do need an examination who might come rushing into the hospital at their last minute."

"I'm sorry," Tamae said, fully cowering into herself. "Mother just insisted...."

"I understand that. But, for me, being called out for gossip is a problem. If you could at least convince your mother to come into the hospital herself, if you can't try to hold back the flood just a little..."

"...Yes, sir." Tamae absently lowered her head. Toshio gave another sigh and exited the entryway. There was a shimmer of hot air over the road, the baking asphalt letting off a heat haze. There was no escaping the frustration that came with the languid stagnation in the air.

With a mother like that, living all alone with her was a hardship he knew but when he was busy like this, and furthermore for dragging him out in this heat, he couldn't help being frustrated with Tamae. If she at least had other relatives or someone to exchange viewpoints with it'd be one thing but Ikumi had married into the village from outside and was estranged from her own family, and due to her bizarre talks and habits, her in-laws in the village cleanly and precisely cut ties with her. Her neighbors kept a respectful distance, or so they called it, so about the only ones who would interact with her were those who had too much time on their hands, the old folks at Takemura. If it was

demanded they would help her and in their own way they offered assistance but, they weren't by any means welcome to become too involved. The mother and daughter were isolated, just the two of them, on the outskirts of the village.

"Good grief..."

The lingering scent of incense still making him nauseous, he had the feeling it had stained its way into his white coat. Being friends with Seishin, he was used to the smell of incense but he'd never thought of the incense at the temple as being unpleasant. Rather, he even thought that in its own way it had an air of refinement but, that might have been a matter of personal preference. Or maybe it was a matter of the incense itself.

Just as he was thinking he'd change his white coat once he got back to the hospital, resident Takami made an appearance there beside the hospital. Still in uniform, he wiped at the nape of his neck with the towel draped around it. As he stopped the car, Takami gave a friendly smile.

"Ah, Junior Doctor!"

Toshio had the feeling he was being saved in some way, by Takami's simplistic smile.

"Working hard. Doing the rounds?"

"And you are working hard as well. A house call?"

"To the Itou's Ikumi-san, yeah."

As Toshio said that, Takami gave an exaggerated sigh. "That's, yeah, hard work all right, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it. Takami-san, you're looking boiled alive there. You wanna come in, drink something cold and cool off?"

"That's, yeah, I'd be grateful."

Takami gave a broad smile. Toshio motioned to the passenger's seat, but he waved his hand and motioned to the hospital. It was about ten meters to the hospital parking lot. Catching his meaning, he drove on into a space in the parking lot, Takami following after him.

"Well, you know, I thought I should at least try to pretend to do some basic

information gathering, and all."

Toshio stepped out of the car, looking back at Takami's embarrassed face.
"Information gathering? On what?"

"Of course, I accept that that thing over at Yamairi was a natural death, but. For the record, confirming that there were no suspicious people sighted wouldn't be a bad idea, I thought."

"Ah ha."

"It's just, if I don't do that much, it feels like I'm not doing my part so to speak, so if you want to say I'm just going through the motions, that might be true."
Takami laughed and wiped his face. Toshio headed towards the side entrance also laughing,

"That might be human nature."

"With that in mind, going here and there asking around was well and good but, in the end, in asking, the most I got any talk out of was Katou-san's boy. Sounds like a few days ago, a scary man was seen walking up along the village road or something."

"Scary?" Toshio asked while heading up into the side entrance.

"He is a kid and all; what scared you and how, I asked, but couldn't get any essentials. In summary, he spotted a man at twilight, carrying a bat or a hammer or something like that, and all I got out of it was that it was scary. According to Kyouzuke-kun, the Kanemasa house is an Oni's nest, it seems."

Toshio laughed. "That's what they mean by 'childish.' I might've been the same when I was a kid."

"You don't remember?"

"I forgot. Going off the stories people around tell me, I was a far throw from anything as cute as that, but."

Takami's voice rose in a laugh, causing Kiyomi's face to pop out from the break room. Kiyomi was of course also off today but, due to the flood of patients that the doctor had been unable to make any progress through, he had her come in. Of course it was a pain for Kiyomi when it was at last her day off

but, having to pay her wages for it made it a pain for Toshio too.

Takami took off his cap and greeted Kiyomi. Toshio brought Takami back towards the waiting room, stripping off his white coat, tossing it aside and standing in front the ventilator opening for the air conditioner. That was when he at last had a stunning revelation.

"I feel that air conditioning may be the greatest invention of mankind."

"Don't you mean air conditioning and refrigerators?"

"May be."

"I walked around in the middle of this heat and when I finally had someone talk to me, all I got was the scary man story and the car story. You know, at the end of July there was the boy from Kami-Sotoba who was hit by a car, wasn't there?"

Yeah, Toshio nodded.

"Since that's the extent of it and nobody's particularly seen anyone unfamiliar, the village is peaceful."

"That's more because it's a closed universe."

Takami laughed as he fanned himself with his cap. "For the record, it was on my mind so I did try going to Kanemasa, too, though."

"And you walked all the way to a place like that. Still, what was on your mind?"

"Well, that car---it was a black, big foreign car, they said, right? There was a rumor that it might have been the Kanemasa car."

"I see. Easy to see how they'd make the association."

"Therefore, just in case, I went to Kanemasa to see what it was like. Confirming whether it was really unmanned or not wouldn't be bad, I thought."

"Hnnn?"

"The gate appears to be sealed by a bar from the inside, so whether I pushed or pulled it wouldn't open. Side entrance was the same. So, I tried to take a

peek inside, you see?"

Toshio opened his mouth. "See what, that you jumped the fence?"

"Yeah, well," Takami said all the more embarrassed. "It was bothering me you see. Inside was a pitiable sight."

"Don't tell me, it was ransacked or something?"

"No, nothing like that. The front yard alllllllways had grass planted. It did but, with nobody living there to water it, then there's this drought on top of it... So, their prized lawn was completely withered. It's, if seed's not planted fresh again, it won't become a lawn again."

"I see," Toshio laughed.

"But, if a car came in or if people were coming and going, you'd be able to tell by the dirt, wouldn't you? For example, there were no marks like footprints, so after all there probably really is no one there, yes? At the least, it doesn't seem like anybody's coming or going. I tried to peek in through the windows too but, it doesn't seem there's anyone there. Incidentally, when I went around to the back, I did see the meter, though."

"Heh?"

"The water and the gas's stopcock was closed. The power meter didn't move an inch either. It didn't seem they were using any gas either. That'd mean unmanned right? If it's all shut off like that, and without the gift of air conditioning or refrigerators, you couldn't live."

"Probably not. Even if you turn the AC off from time to time, if the refrigerator's running, the meter should move, too."

"That is correct. Wow, it sure was a waste of effort."

Takami's visibly tanned face was red as he laughed. Toshio returned a forced smile. Everyone was starved for a story. ---No, they were starved for change. In a rut for years on end, they lived without any change. The incident in Yamairi was a stone thrown into that. Maybe they wanted to preserve those ripples just as long as they could. Maybe they didn't want it to be wrapped up as a simple

tragedy. It wasn't a feeling Toshio didn't understand himself.

Part 3

"How about it, shall we exorcise the day's misfortunes?" Hirosawa said, earning a nod from Mutou. Yuuki had no objections, so he followed along with the two.

It was after the Gotouda funeral service. It was the first time Yuuki had participated in a burial ceremony, seeing a coffin being buried beneath the earth. The coffins used in the village had no small window to view the face. There was no final viewing at the crematory to follow driving the nail into the coffin after the funeral. Maybe that was why even burying the coffin in the hole, the sense of burying the dead themselves seemed so distant, missing that feeling as if the dead were departed for eternity that came with the ashes being presented from the crematory. There was a strange nuance of a difference between the separation in this to that of cremation.

Hirosawa and Yuuki went towards the heart of the village--called Sotoba---to a shop located just outside of the shopping district.

Yuuki was fascinated. Having lived in the village for a year now, he too had needs that brought him to the shopping district frequently. He realized that separated out from it was this building. Furnished with white terracotta, it had a black wooden door beneath a sunken in alcove, with ground glass. It looked to be a shop of some sort but, due to the ground glass making him unable to see inside of the shop, and with the small window that faced outward being made of stained glass, in the end he never was able to peek in. The shop's name was "creole" if he recalled. It was in the crushed glass in golden roman letters but Yuuki didn't know what the word was, much less what kind of shop it was. It had caught his attention every time he'd seen the shop but, without anything he really need of it, he thought he'd ask Mutou about it one day, then kept forgetting about it.

Hirosawa opened the door and the cool air from the air conditioner and the soft sound of piano music flowed out. There was a counter and a small table, the smell of coffee; it was a cafe, Yuuki blinked.

"Welcome."

At the counter was a man in his mid-forties. He wore a white shirt and black pants. He had the air of a bartender. Hirosawa didn't hesitate to sit at the counter. Yuuki and Mutou lined themselves there as well.

"You match. Was there some misfortune?"

Hirosawa nodded at his friendly voice. As he called for an iced coffee, Yuuki did the same.

"The Mourning Crew, yes. ---This is," Hirosawa began, motioning to Yuuki. "Yuuki-san. This is the manager, Hasegawa-san."

Nice to meet you, Hasegawa greeted with a smile. "You're Yuuki-san from the Workshop, aren't you? It's a pleasure."

"Likewise.So it was a cafe then, this place."

At Yuuki's words, Hasegawa's voice rose in a laugh. "We also serve food and at night we serve alcohol as well, though."

"This man here," said Mutou with a pout. "He avoids putting a sign out on purpose."

"Is there a reason for that? I mean, I noticed the shop myself but, since I didn't know what kind of shop it was, I passed. Even though I'd been looking for a cozy little cafe."

"You'll have to excuse me. Please allow me to take this opportunity to accept your patronage," said Hasegawa, a hidden meaning to his smile. "It's quite all right, like this. If I don't put one out, the little old men and women won't make a haunt of this humble shop. I must most humbly pass on playing the music popularly requested or being told to make Natto for lunch. Indeed, arrogant as it is, I am selective in this way about my clientele."

"So it's hard to approach," Mutou said with a glare. "A cafe that won't put out a sign, writing the name in western letters, he does it to make it hard to read on purpose, this man here."

"How is that read, anyway?"

"It's creole," said Hirosawa. "Yuuki-san, how do you feel about jazz?"

"I don't hate it. So I see, it's that creole, is it. But, in that case, isn't that Dixie?" asked Yuuki with a laugh. "Shouldn't it be Chick Corea?"

"You got me," said Hasegawa with a broad smile. "Precisely the type of customer this humble shop has been waiting for."

Yuuki chuckled.

"Hasegawa-san is also a part of the moved-in group," Hirosawa said with his own smile. "Though, his wife is originally from Sotoba, however."

"Ah--is that right?"

"You're going on three years now, is it?" Hirosawa asked, earning a nod from Hasegawa.

"Three and a half. I'm just grateful we've managed to stay in business. When we'd first moved I'd worried my wife would have to work the fields but, as it is we've had a few people bless us as regulars."

"It might not be my place to ask this but, why Sotoba?"

Hasegawa gave a cynical smile. "I used to work at a trading firm actually. Until four years ago when we lost our son."

Yuuki's was at a loss for words.

"Ah, please don't mind it. It was sudden, a motorcycle accident. We were dispirited. You could say that we lost our sense of footing in the city, perhaps. My wife had only her father left, but he died as if following after our son. So we'd moved. Best open a cafe and retire together with my wife, I thought."

"Is that so. Does your wife work in the shop?"

"She is out at the moment. The dinner hour is a touch early. Lunch and dinner, and afterwards, those are the busies hours."

"You also serve lunch?"

"But only simple things and the daily special. Dinner is a similar affair. Our fundamentals are coffee and liquor, you see."

"But what a relief. Sotoba's a great place but, there wasn't a single place to drink."

"You think so too?" Hasegawa said with a smile. "When I'd thought, 'let's move to Sotoba', that was first on my mind. 'But, in Sotoba there's no place to drink, no cafe', I'd thought. So, I'd started one myself. I'd been interested in it before. It's really half hobby to me."

Hirosawa smiled as Yuuki nodded in understanding before he looked to Hirosawa.

"And how was school to---ah, it's currently summer vacation, isn't it."

"But really, I had to come here for a little while. I need a break today."

"You've worked hard. As it's hot, it must have been difficult."

"Yes and no, you could say. It was prearranged."

"Arranged?" Yuuki asked; Hirosawa nodded.

"The graveyard. The burial plot was already emptied, wasn't it?"

"Aa...."

"As we bury, for each death there needs to be a plot the size of one coffin. But, we also plant a fir there. At the end of the mourning period, the sotoba is taken down and a fir is planted. As recent deaths come about and the plots of land are needed, the oldest firs are cut down and the soil is prepared. That's what we mean by arrangements, but if someone hasn't made arrangements it really is tiring. Especially during the summer when the burial can't be put off for the arrangements."

"A tree is cut down? By us?"

"We have had to do it before. For the most part, we rely on the Yasumori Contractors, however. In the summer if we don't ask them, it couldn't be done in time."

"Yasumori Contractors---Ah, in Monzen. They also do that sort of thing?"

"There isn't much construction in the village. Most of the jobs that they do in the village are graveyard preparations. The old missus Gotouda had just asked the contractors this past spring. The soil was still soft, so in a way it was a great help but putting your son in in your place is a pitiable story."

"In Sotoba, you make arrangements before you die?"

"There are people who do. Parents grow old and look at their remaining years, and wanting to pass without anything left undone to fluster others, oversee their own graveyard preparations. It's not unusual per-say but it isn't as if everybody does it. Old missus Gotouda was a dedicated, kindly mother."

"....Yes she was."

"It really is a pitiable story. It truly puts one at a loss for words. If someone elderly dies after battle with a long illness, it's a relief to the bereaved family in a way as well, and if they also have been able to prepare themselves, they may have given up already. But, for a parent who'd suddenly lost a child, I wonder if there are any words in the world that could offer any relief."

Hasegawa gave a meaningful nod to Hirosawa's words. Mutou, too, had a serious expression. Hirosawa gazed into his glass.

"I have a daughter who will be turning four and, if I try to imagine the day she dies, trying to think of anything comforting feels like nonsense to me."

Yuuki's only son's face floated to mind. "....That is definitely true."

As he approached old age, with only his son left, if he had prepared for his own impending death, to have his son go before him... He was overwhelmed by the thought of a surviving parent's grief. He remembered Fuki's heartbreaking, broken visage. Alone amongst the hustle and bustle of the funeral service, shrinking into herself as if she'd lost any support, any place to be, the form of one resolutely bearing her suffering. Nobody could find the words to offer to her, he was sure. The old mother sat isolated from the people around. ---No.

Yuuki drew his brows together slightly. The people around her, rather, didn't appear to pay Fuki herself any mind at all. Nobody had concerned themselves with the old mother who had lost her son. The people there's interest was instead in Yamairi.

"....What was with that," Yuuki murmured, Hirosawa turning his head.

"It's nothing," Yuuki dismissed with a forced smile. "But it was Shuuji-kun's funeral, while the fuss was all about something else. Somehow, I'd gotten myself wrapped up in the idea that in a small community like this, in a situation

like that a bereaved family would be supported by neighborly warmth."

Hirosawa and Mutou exchanged looks. Hirosawa gave a troubled smile.

"Indeed---at today's service, Shuuji-kun and Fuki-san were both ignored for talk of Yamairi."

That was like some kind of festival. He knew the village was starved for a topic. There were those in the area who delighted at a case like this. But, at least while there seated at the funeral, they didn't need to be so excited about it; Hirosawa could certainly understand someone thinking as much.

"And furthermore, what happened was a complete disaster. Three elders from this very village met with an unnatural death, didn't they? I understand that that's a big affair, so I understand that it'd be impossible for talk of it not to come up when meeting for the funeral but, I don't think that it's something they should have been talking so excitedly about. It was a tragedy that befell the community as a whole---I don't think that's the proper way to treat such a thing."

"Yuuki-san, you remember the mushiokuri, don't you?" Hirosawa said quietly. "We marched from hokora to hokora bearing the Betto, didn't we?"

"Ah---yes." Yuuki tilted his head. Hirosawa may have been about to say something abruptly, and in a moment was at a loss for how to put his thoughts in order.

"The traveler's guardians in the hokora... are the gods on the roads, aren't they?"

"I think it may be better to call them the gods of the boundary, myself. In Sotoba there are many travelers' guardians. They may be in the form of Jizo or Koushin mounds but they're all made of stone, and their nature is clearly to serve the role of travelers' guardians. The border of inside and outside of the village, they're the gods of that boundary."

Yuuki blinked. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit lost on where you're...."

"Pardon," said Hirosawa with a smile. "The traveler's guardians are fundamentally the gods of the boundary between the inside and outside. We call our own affairs 'internal' or 'ours', don't we? That doesn't refer only to your

own home as a building, it's more of a conceptional idea. You and your own space, your family and the memories tied in with them, there are various things caught up in the image of what we call 'internal' or 'ours', aren't there?"

"Ah, certainly."

"When talking about buildings, the boundary line for 'inside' is clear. It's the walls of the house, or perhaps the boundary lines of the property. It's known to be denoted by the walls or the fence surrounding a space but, at any rate, there's a boundary where you can say from here to here is my house, isn't there? Even so, the image we have for 'internal' or 'ours' has no such clear boundary. Beyond the 'inner', distinctly unable to be defined inner or outer, is a gray zone. It's the space that's sometimes internal and sometimes external."

"Haa... yes."

"The village is the same. In Sotoba we have a district determined by the administration, and that's a clearly defined boundary. But the image of the village's boundary is vague. That is to say, the village itself has an 'inner' or involvements of its own."

"Its own company, its own school..."

"Yes, just like that. We recognize the 'inner' or 'own' portion of the village but if there's an 'inner' or 'own' there in theory must be an 'outer' or 'other', thus in the end, the world is split into two, the inner and the outer, and in doing that, there's the question of whether that barrier is inner or outer."

"Haa, that's certainly...."

"That's what it means to draw a conceptional line like that. What's white is over here, what isn't white we'll push over here as black. If you do that in the end you have vaguely gray remains that you can neither call white nor black. In other words it's the grey zone that separates the image into two parts. That grey at times--depending on what you're comparing it to, it can become white or it can become black."

"Ah, that could be the case at times, couldn't it?"

"What we imagine as the boundary of 'inner, belonging to the village' isn't clearly defined as inside itself. It's surrounded in that grey zone. This vague gray

zone is a barrier, and a barrier is ultimately both inner and outer. The traveler's guardians are the gods of that boundary. Placed between the inner and outer, ours and others, the gods themselves are that boundary."

"Huh...."

"So the traveler's guardians protect the 'ours' from invading hindrances from the outside, that is to say evils, and rgwt usher in good harvests, at the same time being classified as an evil spirit themselves. This duality of those stone traveler's guardians' has, since times immemorial, made those stones into the barrier between those things which have life and those which do not. That's why stones, stone monuments and stone Jizo have been set up around the barrier of the village as traveler's guardian deities."

"Ah, the memorial services center around those traveler's guardian deities then, making them offerings. While doing that, we wave the Betto around the village, drawing out the impurities and evils, the insects and the disease, casting it into the barrier. Now that you mention it, that kind of festival certainly involved taking it outside of the village to dispose of it, but in a way it wasn't really outside."

Hirosawa smiled broadly. "That's right. That's precisely the duality of the barrier. In the village, Oni are a metaphor for disease. The Oni go along with the Betto out to the village border. While we do that, we do the Uppo dance to step into and purify the inner or our own portion of that border."

"I see, Oni are outer and other, good fortune is the inner and ours."

Yuuki smiled, making Hirosawa smile as well.

"Even now," Hirosawa said with a gentle laugh. "this village performs a festival like that with great religious zeal. To those of the village, there's a strong feeling of 'inner' or 'us'. To put it another way, they're isolated from the 'outer' or 'others'."

"Ah.... I think that's something I understand."

Hirosawa sighed, gazing into his coffee glass.

"Yamairi was a community on the verge of extinction. There were three people left, and being geographically isolated as well, I think there was a sense

of separation from those of the village. If you were to ask if Yamairi was inside or outside of the village, then by its history and by the administrative distinctions, you would have to call it inside. But, somewhere beyond conscious thought, I think there's a sense that it's outside somewhere, an other."

Yuuki nodded, "Ah. It's a far cry from the image of inner or us, it's become a border itself, Yamairi."

"That's what I think. The elderly died in Yamairi, and because the people are 'ours' it's a pure and real tragedy. Three old people out on their own, with nobody to care for them, dying in their desertion. But, while it is a tragedy as something personal, internal, if we set it as outside for a moment, it becomes nothing more than an event that happened across the shore. That said, if something happens across the shore, a tragedy is still a tragedy. When we set eyes on a calamity in a foreign country, it's a tragedy, we think 'those poor people', we have cognizance that it's a tragedy for the other side. A certain sense of reality, of its relation to us is missing but we accept that it is a tragedy, we react to it, we hold an awareness of it as a tragedy."

"But, Yamiri wasn't outside and they weren't others either?"

"That's true. Yamairi was the border. Neither inner nor outer, ours nor others. It isn't inside or personal to treat it with solemnity. That said, it's not far enough outside not to hold an awareness of it, not to make a fuss about it."

"Ah... is that right. I see."

"That's probably why the way they're handling Yamairi seems so hopelessly flippant. And while a funeral is a type of religious service, any ritual makes an ordinary day into the extraordinary day. In a way it's a festival. A great number of people have gathered around to participate in one ceremony, there's no denying that that is one meaning to the word festival. And then another something unusual comes bounding in. It isn't completely unrelated, but this abnormality is one that's at a safe distance. So then we have what's known as synergy---it would probably be impossible to keep it from exciting them."

"I suppose so...." Yuuki said with a nod. I see, that's what it is, he thought. While he accepted it, it was true that somewhere in his heart was a despondency.

Part 4

"There's no particular reason to rush. If it works for you, we could do the all night vigil tomorrow."

Though Tokujiro was speaking from the other end of the telephone, Seishin tilted his head.

"Is that really all right?"

"It's just terrible. If only Hidemasa-san's eldest son-in-law didn't go and made arrangements on his own, but he didn't understand the way things are and went and had them cremated."

Seishin blinked, still holding the receiver. "Well---indeed, Hidemasa-san was---"

"You might say there's no other way to return those remains, that might be true enough, but. The truth is, the Boss Ohkawa is at the point he wants Gigorou-san cremated, himself. With that said, it's just terrible, having Mieko-san burned too. That son-in-law didn't know that we bury here, he should have followed up with what to do with the remains himself too. Honestly, it's just insensitive."

Seishin was silent. Rather than the son-in-law who had made arrangements being insensitive, it was likely more that Sotoba itself was unique in still burying its corpses. It probably couldn't be helped that people not of the village wouldn't put much weight on the custom and would take it lightly.

But, those in the village had a strong resistance towards cremation. Indeed, the dead were as dead as a corpse as they were ashes but those of the village held the view that cremating inflicted injury on the deceased body.

"Since that's how things are, there's no use hurrying the funeral. Well, with Shuuji-kun's funeral having been just the other day, since there is some leeway, I thought tomorrow might be better."

"That it may."

"In the mean time, I'll go with the police to pick up the bones. I'll manage plans for the funeral once I get back, so tonight just take her easy."

I will await your contact, said Seishin hanging up the phone. He thought a little, setting his eyes on the blackboard. There were several things entered onto the itinerary but, all of it were things Ikebe or Tsurumi could do. Seeing that much, Seishin stood up. He left a memo on the blackboard and exited the office.

Traveling the path he had become so used to traveling he descended the mountain to the Ozaki clinic back yard. Looking at his wristwatch, they were in non-examination hours. If there were no house calls, Toshio might have been in the waiting room or perhaps in his own room in the main house wing. Walking along the yard to peek into the waiting room, he could see him facing his desk and gazing over some paperwork from behind. He turned when Seishin lightly tapped on the sliding door's glass window. As Toshio made an intentionally sour face and motioned inside, Seishin opened the glass door and came inside. The air conditioned air was pleasant.

"You picked up the stank of a rotting corpse right away and came running, huh?"

"----Eh?"

Seishin stared at Toshio who said that to him as soon as he entered the room.

"You came because you heard the bodies are coming back, right? When it comes to things like that, monks are a class of vultures."

Seishin gave a wry smile. "Vultures or hyenas, either way. Did the results of the autopsy return?"

"SUD."

"What's that?"

"It's what they call Sudden Unexplained Death. Anyway the situation was abnormal so it looks like the police did a thorough one as well but, the end result is cause unknown. It doesn't look like the culture labs and stuff are in here, so for the real results we're probably talking about three weeks but, anyway that's the conclusion for now."

"But that's...."

Even if you 'but that's...' at me, Toshio breathed.

"More than not knowing the cause for old man Murasako and Gigorou-san, it's closer to say the the corpse wasn't in a good condition for determining the cause. To begin with in natural deaths, even with a full autopsy the clear cause of death can only be determined under or about half the time. On top of that this heat catalyzed the decay. The internal organs mollified and fused together muddily. So even if you tell us to get a clear cause of death.... Moreover it's not like we have a medical coroner like the ones in the capital or a metropolis. Around here there's no forensic pathologist to do the autopsies, just regular general practitioners. We're at our limit here." Toshio sighed. "Old man Murasako, anyway, is thought not to have had any external injuries while he was alive. The decay and post-death damages---these were mostly by insects too but---they were intense, so what the cause of death was couldn't be specified. Gigorou-san himself had advanced decay but on the parts discovered at least none of the injuries looked like anything that happened while he was alive. After he died he was preyed on and damaged by wild dogs, it seems is their story. There're parts that were never uncovered but if you think about it while looking at the way things were on the scene, you'd conclude it was sudden unexpected death."

"And Mieko-san?"

"Old lady Mieko too, didn't have any external injuries. It's sound that she died a natural death. When she was opened up she had some problems here and there it looks like. She had coronary arteriosclerosis, myocarditis, postmortem lividity in the lungs and abdominal cavity, and what was especially striking was the necrosis of the liver tissue. Might have been acute liver failure, acute hepatitis brought on by liver inflammation, something along those lines."

"Oh..." Seishin nodded.

"For the two old guys, they were dead perhaps five or six days. ----On the contrary," Toshio said sharply, thrusting his mug towards Seishin. "Old lady Mieko was dead about thirty hours."

"There was no mistake about it, after all?"

"No mistake about it. Ain't that the craziest story? The old man died, and the old woman goes on living with the old man's corpse for days. Without a single word to anyone. Her futon was lined up nicely with his in the room. The old woman herself crawled out of the futon and went out to the yard to die, is how it looks."

Seishin accepted that. In the village, there were rumors floating that Mieko had followed after her husband. In these circumstances, such an interpretation was hard to avoid.

"The old lady herself died a natural death. And furthermore it's certain she was tending to the old man, so there's no way he could have had an accident or fallen. If there was an accident, no matter what the circumstances, she should have called someone, called an ambulance. It looks like Hidemasa-san and Gigorou-san both died in their futons. Old lady Mieko came here before she died saying both were in bad condition. She came for Gigorou-san's medicine, though. He had chronic hypertension. It didn't seem like anything specific was bad in any specific way by any means, so she was saying it was probably a could, but."

Seishin blinked. Probably a cold---those were words he'd heard someplace else, recently.

"At any rate, that's how it's being laid to rest. Maybe it's possible they just died like that, so it goes sometimes. At least, if there was no incident, there's no case. Nevermind that the wife was in advanced age, she was under the pressure of tending to two sick patients. She probably didn't have time to eat, sleep or breathe. So when her husband died, a tense thread was cut and down she went."

"In other words, while Mieko-san was tending to Hidemasa-san's health, she was the one under too much strain to inform anyone of Hidemasa-san's death, as she already in such poor health herself...?"

"So we've got to assume right? But, she seemed well enough to at least make a call. Her husband was dead beside her, she herself was in such poor condition that just getting to her phone would be difficult; in those kind of situations, don't people become even more desperate to get to a phone? But then, she

wasn't desperate at all. The phone was at her bedside. If she even just got up from bed, her hand could have reached the telephone stand. She didn't even have to get up. She could have raised her body and stretched out her hand and made it somehow. But, the old lady for whatever reason decided instead of just reaching her hand out, to go two meters along the floor towards the outside for a few breaths of fresh air."

And furthermore, four or five days had passed since her husband had died, Seishin added on in his mind. Just what had happened to Mieko?

"Gigorou-san tended to have high blood pressure and was always getting medicine to lower that from us. So he might've had a cerebral hemorrhage brought on by high blood pressure or some cardiac disease. But, the old man from the Murasako's himself didn't have any illnesses hanging on him that could be called life threatening. If I try to think of a cause, all I get is that summer cold the old lady mentioned."

"Is a summer cold something that kills someone?"

Toshio let out a heavy sigh. "Even if it was a cold, when you die you die. Even among the viruses that cause summer colds, there's some scary ones. Influenza causes inflammation of the lungs but a summer cold causes cardiac inflammation."

"Then----"

"The possibility, at least, is there."

"Even so, three people are three people."

Even if we are all mortal, he tried to say, though Seishin swallowed those words down.

Toshio waved his hand.

"It definitely seems strange but, there's a chance it could've happened. If we're only saying something's possible, there's the possibility Martians swept down and scared them to death too."

Seishin gave a wry smile, Toshio himself giving another simmering smile.

"The three in Yamairi were getting on in age. True Hidemasa-san didn't have

any especially chronic disease, but he had weak bronchial tubes; every time he caught a cold in the winter it became bronchitis. Maybe it turned to bronchitis this time too. Mieko-san at least seemed healthy but she couldn't get around like her body was brand new. And in the case of acute liver failure, there are times when liver failure leads to hepatic encephalopathy. Once hepatic encephalopathy occurs, there's a change in levels of consciousness, and that sometime leads to unusual behaviors. That could even be the reason for why she lied down for bed happily next to her husband's corpse. ----More to the point, there's no other reasoning to explain it, might be the way to put it."

"Oh....."

"But for the police what's more pressing than the three dead human bodies are the leftover animal body parts here and there. In the Murasako kitchen and in Gigorou-san's kitchen, something was chowing down. Heartily, too. 'Cause it was the kitchen?"

"So, wild dogs after all?"

Toshio drew back.

"Who knows? Putting aside wild dogs playing at having a nice sit-down dinner in the kitchen, the police suspect rabies. They didn't seem to find any signs of the rabies virus in Mieko-san for the time being but they were really persistent in asking if she'd had a the vaccine and gamma globulin or not. At first they thought she might have slipped into a psychosis but they can only think the people at least died normally, so it seems they threw out that line of reasoning."

"Is that so...." Seishin murmured. He naturally let out a breath. Maybe he was relieved, or maybe it was because of something else, he himself didn't know.

He looked up when Toshio gave a grandiose, overdone sigh.

"---By the way, you, how long are you going to stay standing there?"

Yasuyo was taking a break in the break room when Ritsuko and Yuki brought in the tea.

"Tea ti----me!"

Yasuyo looked up from her mail order catalog at Yuki's merry voice, nodding her gratitude.

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome," Yuki said puffing out her chest childishly, then turning to look to the door behind her again. "Did the doctor say what he's doing? Maybe I should call him in. Or, would it be better to bring it to his waiting room?"

"Ah, you don't need to worry about it. When I peeked in earlier, it looked like the Junior Monk had come."

Oh my, Ritsuko raised her voice. "When did he.... I should have brought tea for the Junior Monk as well shouldn't I?"

"I brought it to him earlier."

"How weird," said Yuki sitting in a chair. "The Junior Monk, he's always coming out of nowhere like that. Even though he doesn't need to sneak in through the back like that, it'd be fine to come in openly."

Yasuyo smiled wryly. "Those two, they've been like that for a long time. It's because the Madame can't put on a good front."

"Can't put on a good front?"

"You see, no matter what other pretexts there are the Junior Monk is the son of the temple, isn't he? In this village, the temple is important. The most important is the temple, next is Kanemasa, and number three are the Ozakis, it's been that way for a long time, now."

"Despite being the doctor, they aren't number one?"

There may be those who don't get sick, but nobody doesn't die. There are other places to go if you're sick but because every family is a member of that temple parish, that is the temple that has to be used. If a monk doesn't say a requiem for someone, they can't go on to that world. To the village it's only obvious, but the Madame can't accept it. She's the type of person who worries about things like that, you know."

"Hmm."

"Since he was little, she would absolutely not let the Junior Doctor go to play at the temple. No matter what, the temple is important, so if one of the family went to play and was given a snack or drink the like, she couldn't get by without a single word of gratitude. She can't bear to humble herself and bow to them."

That's why though, since he was the son of the temple after all, she couldn't just say don't play with him."

Yuki's eyes were wide. "That's how things are?"

"More or less. ---On the other hand, if the boy himself were to come over himself, she has no choice but to be hospitable, and anytime something were to happen, she would have to lower herself and bow her head all the same. So, she really doesn't want him to come. But, because he is who he is, she can't say "don't come." That's how it came to the point where she didn't care if he came and went freely from the Junior Doctor's room. As long as he does that, even if she knows he's come she can pretend not to have noticed, and no matter what happens she can go on saying she never new."

"That sure is complicated..." Even though Yuki spoke seriously, Yasuyo smiled..

"Madames. On the temple side, with the Junior Monk being the way he is, neither the monk nor the Madame put themselves above anyone else. But our Madame's the one who decided on her own to let it get to her."

Yasuyo smiled bitterly. She was haughty, would that be an okay way to put it? Toshio's mother, Ozaki Takae was that kind of character. It seemed her own family was from some prestigious hospital, so the customs that placed the temple and village chief above the doctors was an exceeding affront to her dignity. She was called "the Madame" of the hospital--in the village those called "the Madame" were until recently only the wives of the temple, Kanemasa and Ozaki---and she made no moves to eradicate that which distinguished her from the villagers.

The predecessor had that sort of front, so until Toshio came back and settled in as the medical director, Yasuyo and the other's hardships were unending. Overall, they were made to help with things from making the family meal arrangements to the cleaning, they were treated like able bodied servants. Even while resting at home on a day off, the phone could suddenly ring and they could be demanded to come over and help rearrange the furniture or the like.

"We were made to come in on our days off and help with tea parties and things like that," Yasuyo laughed. "It used to be that way. Really, what a hassle it was."

"What was with that? If it were me? If they tried to make me do that, I'd quit!"

"Yuki-chan can say that because you've only known the Junior Doctor's generation. In the Big Doctor's time, he just didn't seem to think anyone was fit

if they weren't of the village. When the generations switched, really, the hospital's atmosphere did a complete turnaround. Just three years ago, there was nothing as obliging as this break room. At lunch, we ate at the back entrance by the water, there were no tea or furnishings, we had to buy and bring in our own tea lives."

"...I respect the doctor just a little bit more now."

Yasuyo's voice rose in a laugh as Yuki seemed strangely emphatic.

She used the hospital staff as able bodied servants. But when it came to the hospital, she had no connection to it; that was Takae's style. No matter how busy it was, she would absolutely never help (not that she had any qualifications to do so), and in an emergency or if there was someone seeking a house call, she wouldn't even answer the phone. Called "The Madame of the Ozakis," and other than attendance at mandatory meetings, she would never mingle with those of the village, and other than going to tea ceremony or Noh plays, she stayed closed up in the house.

That Takae's son, Toshio, possessed a temperament that did not match well with either Takae nor the predecessor at all but as expected, Kyouko, whom he'd chosen as his wife, was a woman who would be said to be like Takae, which may have been a sign the son would ultimately never escape the mother. Ozaki Kyokou did not cohabit. When he first returned to the village, she was in the house at that time, and the tendency to say she was going out for lessons or the like matched Takae's patterns but, eventually, though she had the house, she became fed up with it and opened an antique shop in the town of Mizobe, living in a rental apartment. If she felt like it she'd return but, those times were becoming further and further apart. Takae could not suppress her discontent with such a wife and when she returned, there were no end to their quarrels (and, because of that Kyouko's returns became further apart still) but Yasuyo found them to be a similar mother and daughter-in-law.

(.....Yeah, the Junior Doctor has it hard.)

Part 5

Thinking she heard a horn, Yano Tae opened her eyes. Maybe because of her age, sleep was shallow. The slightest thing would make her open her eyes. Even hearing the breaks on the highway or trucks' air horns had woken her up before but in tonight's case, she had a feeling more clearly like being awoken by someone.

Looking at the clock on the tatami at her bedside, it was two in the morning. Again, the horn sounded. Realizing it was in front of the house--from the Drive-In parking lot, Tae rose.

Tae's bedroom was at the back of the house. Rather than facing the highway, it was set aside a yard that was facing the paddy fields. Coming out of that bedroom and dragging herself down the hall, there was a tatami room that doubled as a family altar. Entering that room, Tae shielded her eyes. There was a car in the front parking lot, its headlights shinning over the house. The high beams must have been on, and being summer the sliding storm shutter was left open, the bright light shining squarely into the room, and without much thought to it Tae was shaken up.

"....What's going on?"

Bare feet walking down the hall behind Tae, her daughter Kanami spoke. She turned around, seeing Kanami shielding her eyes with her hand, paled by the stark light overher.

"...I wonder."

At the same time that Tae answered, the horn honked again. Kanami crossed the room to the veranda. Her long, pitch black shadow fell over the room.

"What is this ruckus about?" Kanami called out from the sliding open doorway. Some person's voice or another called back but Tae couldn't pick up what was said. The truck was idling, loudly enough to drown out their voices.

"Hold on. Could you please turn off the light?" Kanami called out into the

parking lot. "Chigusa"'s wide parking lot had one trailer, and what looked like a passenger car on the lot. The finer details couldn't be discerned. The light pouring in as if to scorch their eyes didn't help.

They may have heard Kanami's objection; the light turned off. The act robbed her of her sight. All she could see in the pitch darkness were the specks of the afterimage of the headlights. As she blinked off the faint dizziness she felt, the frustrating idling sound ceased. It seemed the idea to cut the engine finally occurred to them.

As her eyes adjusted to the light and it became quiet, she could see that there were three cars in the parking lot, illuminated by the street light. One was a jumbo trailer, two were passenger vehicles, one a sedan and the other a 1Box.

"Pardon, I'm very sorry!" a shameful young voice said. It seemed to come from a young man by the 1Box car.

"Just what is this ruckus about. What time do you think it is?"

"I am so very embarrassed. I don't know where I am and..."

Kanami narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. The young man came closer to Kanami. He was probably in his med-twenties or so, and didn't appear suspicious.

"I've driven around here so many times but I don't know the road and... I'm completely at a loss, so."

"Where is it that you are going?"

The young man lowered his head, utterly apologetic. "It's a community called Sotoba, but."

Kanami sighed. "This is Sotoba."

With an 'eh?' the young man surveyed his surroundings.

"There's a road in to our left. Right when you turn onto that is the community of Sotoba. There's a blinking stop light, Sotoba is written beneath that isn't it?"

The young man hastily sprung back, looking towards the highway. His voice rung out, shrinking as he returned forward. "My apologies! I had overlooked it!"

"Well it is easy to overlook, but. Well, I'm glad I could be of use."

"I really offer my deepest apologies!" The young man bowed his head low.

"You have business in Sotoba? At this hour?"

Yes, the young man smiled. "The truth is we should have arrived earlier but. I was careless, and it became a terrible affair. Really, how rude of me."

"By chance are you moving in? Are you the Kanemasa people, I wonder."

"Kanemasa?"

"Ah, it's the name of a place. In the northwest of the community of Sotoba is that mansion on the high grounds? The old western style house."

That is right, said the young man bowing again. "We are Kirishiki. I am so very sorry for being a nuisance to you with our change of residence."

Well, though Kanami. Then, Kanemasa really was going to have someone move in. ---That said, what a move-in it was.

"If you're going to that house, that's the road that you want. Take the road allong the river straight up, and at the intersection between the bridge that leads to the Shrine, go the opposite direction of the shrine. That's the left."

"Take the left before the shrine."

"Right. Go straight that way, and you'll come to the mountain. It's right at the top of that slope.

"Thank you very much."

The young man bowed his head, gave another apology for waking them ad dashed back to the truck. He relayed something to the driver and once again lowered his head to Kanami before hurrying to the 1Box. Once again the engine reverberated. The truck and two cars turned about in the parking lot, heading out towards the highway. The last to leave was a white foreign car. In the driver's seat was a man and in the back seat could be seen two figures. One was a woman, and the other appeared to be a child. As the car passed in front of Kanami, she had the impression the woman nodded in salutation to her but it may have just seen something she had thought she'd seen due to the light.

"....Well, that's a surprise." Tae poked her face out from behind Kanami, seeing the truck off.

"Tell me about it. What a move-in."

"What terrible sense of direction they must have, though."

So it seems, said Kanami with a forced smile. While the entrance to the village was easy to overlook, there was only one branch off of the highway that lead into the community. if one looked properly at a map, normally someone could figure it out. In the first place, they were going to move into a village, but they hadn't even tried to visit it once before?

Kanami felt something lurking in her chest. It wasn't as if she found it particularly suspicious but. Even so, weren't the group that came by just now acting strange, somehow? It was like they went out of their way to wake up Kanami and her mother. She had the feeling that was why they asked the way.

(....Oh, that couldn't be.)

Kanami watched the car turn down the village road. The white sedan looked like quite the luxury car. The young man seemed out of character for that mansion. He didn't have the air of its master. Rather, wasn't the master more likely to be the one driving the sedan? In that case, she wondered why the master himself didn't get out of the car and come out.

"Just like I thought."

Kanami mumbled, as Tae tilted her head.

"About what?"

"It looks like they're pretty weird people."

They are, said Tae, looking still towards the village road.

Chapter 4 Translation Notes

Chapter 4 - 1

Natsuno starts out talking quite formally towards Ritsuko (desu, masu, keigo), slipping more towards his usual speech as they become more comfortable and casual (da/no copulas). This is normal, proper Japanese behavior by a child to an adult and amongst strangers as well. The content of his speech may be so, but I tried to relay that he was not being rude in terms of how he was speaking. I'm afraid I may have failed to carry this in translation well.

Medical:

The bump described as having been on Natsuno's knee that one grows out of, usually as they reach their full height, is Osgood-Schlatter syndrome. It's inflammation of the tendon below the kneecap, usually before the knee is finished growing. Normally it goes away as adolescent growth finishes.

Chapter 4 - 2

Geckos

- Geckos, called

yamori

or 'house guardians' are almost unanimously considered good luck in Japan. There are a few scattered legends of them representing the souls of dead warriors and being prayed away by monks, but these stories are fairly obscure to the average Japanese person. In other eastern cultures, they can be considered different forms of good or bad luck for a variety of reasons. They are quite common in summer, all the more in run down houses near forests. Draw your own conclusions to what they mean here, if they mean anything, or whether Ikumi is simply itching to be relevant. I'll continue fishing for sources on whether there's any significance to their appearance during prayer.

Chapter 4 - 3

Uchi and Soto, Inner and Outer, Us and Them

- Hirosawa engages Yuuki in a discussion of uchi and soto. Popular terms in Nihonjinron, or the study of Japanese people and their culture, they are often even left untranslated in English language discussions.

[Here](#)

is an excellent and brief summarizing article that requires no knowledge of Japanese to follow, and relates to the behaviors and feelings discussed in the chapter. The

[Wikipedia article](#)

on the subject focuses more on the linguistic aspect than the actions taken as a result. There are full essays and even full books available on the various aspects of uchi and soto.

Your translator posits that the concept is not so uniquely Japanese as to lose anything in translation when put into English terms or require a note on the words themselves to follow the text, but feedback is welcomed and it can be put back as uchi/soto if readers believe it's an improvement. In a comment below, I will post the translation of the blurbs with uchi and soto left as they are in the original text.

However universal a concept is, it bares mention how concrete it is in Japanese, to the point of being necessarily understood in order to be competent (not even fluent) in the language.

Uchi

is a word that can literally mean 'myself' or 'us' as well as 'inside';

soto

or outside is never used as any second or third person pronoun.

Japanese verbs have an optional, psychologically directional inflection. An

example is the verb suffix -kureru which form implies a benefit coming to the speaker from the verb to which it is affixed.

If Ono Fuyumi were to write your sister a letter, your sister is 'uchi' enough that it would or at least could be spoken of with the directional -kureru as if you were a direct beneficiary.

*Imouto ni tegami wo kaite**kureta**.*

She wrote a letter to my sister. You may even feel at one with fandom enough to say as much if talking about another fan you've never even met receiving a letter. This would not be the case if discussing that Ono Fuyumi wrote a letter with no connection to you, such as her accountant.

Dareka ni tegami wo kaita.

She wrote a letter to somebody.

Note that while you probably are more endeared towards Ono Fuyumi than some unknown fan and would wish more well upon her than you would a stranger fellow fan, the fan is more in your sphere of reference. Ono being soto or 'other' isn't a matter of amicability alone, nor are the Yamairi three necessarily disliked as a layer of soto.

This is not only in spoken Japanese but commonly in narratives, displaying where sympathies are expected to lie. While "

Kyousuke-kun ni kiiteinai

" (They didn't listen to Kyousuke-kun) is grammatically correct, it may mark the writer as foreign for how much more natural "

*Kyousuke-kun ni kiiite**kurenai***

" is, presuming a greater sense of 'ours' or 'uchi' for the reader in Kyousuke.

There are other directional verbs which are based on the stations of the giver, receiver, speaker and related formalities, but we'll stick to the basics here in order to emphasize the uchi/soto concept. You'd probably use more formal inflections for the actions taken by Ono Fuyumi, or anyone you'd address as -sensei.

Chapter 4 - 4

Medical:

postmortem lividity

(in the lungs and abdominal cavity) - Upon death, the blood pools and bruising occurs at the bottom of the body, such as the back if you die face up, or the feet if you died hanging.

The blood settled in the chest and stomach, meaning she likely died face down, rather than having been, say, poisoned, dying in her sleep, then being moved. Because there are no external wounds suggesting no assault, it further supports the idea of a natural death.

myocarditis

- inflammation of the heart muscle, which can be from a variety of causes.

coronary arteriosclerosis

- when the coronary arteries harden due to a deposit of fatty materials.

necrosis of the liver tissue

- when liver cells start to die. Ozaki lists several liver problems that could be potentially responsible. Severe liver problems can also lead to pooling fluids in the stomach.

hepatic encephalopathy

- when the liver fails to filter out certain toxins, they effect your brain, leading to altered mental statuses, ranging from comas to forgetfulness to (rarely but potentially) full on crazy.

When the body loses a large amount of blood, there are hormones released

to perform emergency response activities, such as assuring the remaining blood goes to the vital organs. The hormones also stimulate the liver to break down glycogen to release glucose and fatty things into to the bloodstream. In cases of prolonged low blood supply, the liver would suffer distinct failure and begin to die off (become necrotic). I find this relevant to note given Mieko was found with heart problems when her primary physician Ozaki) pointed out a distinct lack of prior history of such in her to this point.

gamma globulin

- a vaccine for rabies.

The medical notes are perhaps more conjecture on the authoress's medical writing than something that it's my job to present as a translator, so I may remove them and just store them on side-posts so that the culture/translation notes can be provided with the full translation PDF at a later date.

Chapter 5

Part 1

"Then, the three people in Yamairi died a natural death after all?"

Sumi said while changing his clothing in the room. Sumi had hurried in to serve as the staff for the overnight vigil and funeral services for Yamairi. Mitsuo, who was helping Sumi, gave a nod.

"Seems so. The Junior Monk said so."

Sumi lived in Mizobe. His home was a temple of the same sect, and Sumi was their second son. The number of parishioners was not terribly large, to the point where the head monk his father as well as his brother the assistant head monk his elder brother were able to hold side jobs as instructors, so they didn't particularly need Sumi's help. That was why he sometimes came and did part-time work as a monk here.

"Well, it's three of them, but all three were getting on in years."

"How old were they?"

"Just how old were they... I'm sure Gigorou-san was already about eighty or so, wasn't he?"

"Then, he enjoyed his longevity," Sumi sighed. "Our grandfather died at the age of sixty one, you know. My old man will be fifty six this year but, he's already complaining from morning to night that he hurts here and there, too."

"Yup, he lived a long, longevity filled life." Mitsuo forced a smile. "When you get near eighty, you're at the age for a peaceful death but, more than anything it's how things went. Somehow it doesn't seem like it was a peaceful death. An unexpected death, that's what it feels like."

"That's true, no matter how you look at it, it leaves the impression of an untimely, sudden death."

"Well, it's three people so all of them being cleared away in one go is rare but, things like this do happen don't they."

They do, Sumi nodded as he draped the stole over himself. "At our parish, in one month, a house of four were taken out one after another."

"Four people. That's unusual."

"Of them one of them was already over ninety, a grandfather already in the hospital, but starting with his son just over forty who fell to a heart attack, following right after was his father, his grandfather, and his mother, making four people. Come to think of it, that was in the summer, too."

"I don't like it," Mitsuo shook his head. "The deaths continue on don't they. We've had Shuuji-san followed by those three. I hope it doesn't carry on with this kind of vigor, don't you?"

"Wasn't Gotouda Shuuji-san after them?" Sumi pointed out, making Mitsuo blink.

"Really? The first to actually die were the three people who died in Yamairi? Shuuji-san was drug along as the nephew, then?"

"Pulled in," Sumi mused as Ikebe popped his head in.

"Tsurumi-san has returned from the memorial service."

That's good, said Mitsuo with a smile.

"Somehow he was able to make it on time. I thought for sure he'd get held up. The old man Towada loves to talk, you know."

"So I've heard," Ikebe laughed, taking his own stole from where it was hanged. "---It seems they finally moved in."

"Moved in?" Mitsuo blinked, Ikebe giving a somehow triumphant smile.

"Kanemasa. Last night---Ah, this morning, I guess. Anyway, the truck apparently came in the middle of the night."

"Well then."

In the middle of the night, asked Sumi with his eyes wide.

"They're some pretty strange people."

Mitsuo, seeming surprised again, gave a half nod. "You said it. ---And in the end, what kind of people were they, did they say?"

"It doesn't seem anyone's seen the master. Someone from Kami-Sotoba met with their help or some young part-time worker, though. They woke them up in the middle of the night, they said. To ask directions."

"Heh?"

"The full fleet was a big truck and two cars it seems. A grey four wheel drive and a white BM, it seems."

Mitsuo sighed and shook his head. Even now amongst the villagers the rumor mill was heavy with talk of the one who had his Meada Shigeki and ran having been the master of Kanemasa. "What? Then, that foreign car didn't have any connection to Kanemasa after all did it."

"We cannot be sure, Mitsuo-san. After that, they may have changed cars."

"That's not something you can just do lightly." Mitsuo narrowed his eyes at Ikebe.

"Either way," laughed Sumi. "At today's all night vigil, the talk will be too loud for the sutras."

"You've said it. The number of condolence callers is going to increase exponentially."

Good grief, Sumi and Mitsuo thought as they exchanged looks. With this, the village would no longer be preoccupied with Yamairi. Having to go and hold an all night service and a funeral tomorrow, they'd determined that they would not be able to proceed with any austerity.

As if reading their minds, Ikebe laughed. "Well, is it so bad? I mean, weird rumors had been flying about the Kanemasa mansion. Whether there were signs of people's presence on the grounds, or that they'd heard voices groaning inside the gates. With this, the ghost-story like rumors will probably die out."

There's that, said Mitsuo sad forcing a smile, when heavy footsteps sounded Tsurumi's approach.

"Tsurumi-san, you have worked hard today."

Tsurumi lowered his head slightly to Mitsuo's voice, then surveyed the state of the room and glared at Ikebe.

"What is this, Ikebe, you've already spread it?"

"Of course I did! From left to right..."

"If you're supposed to be a monk, you cannot be so light lipped."

"A reticent monk can't do his trade, can he?"

"Well, there is that," said Tsurumi, said with a laugh. "By the way, the Junior Monk is?"

"I saw him speaking with Fuki-san," said Ikebe.

"He must be comforting her. Fuki-san has had so much misfortune herself. Her son and her brother, in succession like that."

"You said it. But, I wonder if the Junior Monk'll be okay without any sleep, too. I saw him before he left the temple, and his eyes were pure red."

Sumi lamented with a heavy breath of a sigh. "Another sleepless night?"

Looks like it, said Mitsuo with a forced smile.

"In the morning I recommended that he take a rest and at least entrust the morning ceremonies to Tsurumi-san and Ikebe-san though. With the memorial service today and the all night vigil, we all know how hard it is on him."

Really, Ikebe nodded.

"It's because the Junior Monk is diligent. Even though he could at least skip roughly a service or so."

Tsurumi knitted his brows. "Is there such a measurement as 'roughly a service or so'?"

"It's a figure of speech. He looked sleep deprived yesterday too, didn't he? Even though our schedule was so full."

"It's busy until Bon passes, isn't it. It'd be fine if he took a break from his side job at least during this season, but. Well, that business is like being a monk,

even if you have spare time, you're never resting, in that trade."

"That's true."

While half listening to the conversation with Tsurumi and the others, Mitsuo spread out Tsurumi's clothes on the clothes rack. Tsurumi and Ikebe were officially the disciples of the head monk, Shinmei. During the four years while Seishin was in college, Ikebe entered into the services of this temple. Tsurumi had been at this temple since before Mitsuo had started coming. Both of them had more experience as monks than the assistant head monk Seishin, and Tsurumi was much older than Seishin. To hear talk of other temples, these kinds of situations could breed all sorts of discord but, the man in question, Seishin, was mild mannered in all he did and gave full dues to Tsurumi and Ikebe, and in return Tsurumi and Ikebe acknowledged that the assistant chief monk was earnest, so there weren't any particular problems.

He bowed his head formally to even Mitsuo who was no more than an extra hand at the temple, calling him "Mitsuo-san" each time and giving him his own dues. Though Seishin wrote novels, which in truth he didn't know if what he wrote was any good or not but he was never boastful of his side job, even while writing those novels he was crammed up in the office, so he left a good impression of not neglecting his duties.

In the end, it may have been because of the master of Tsurumi and Ikebe, the one who raised Seishin, Shinmei. ---Though he had no control of his limbs and was bedridden, even now the reverence to the head monk ran deep in the parish. Mitsuo himself was no exception.

"But it'd do him some good to relax a bit, in the Junior Monk's case." Ikebe took a breath that seemed like a sigh. "Like right now, even though getting even just a bit of rest would be good, he's been staying with Fuki-san for sooo long."

"He must be worried about Fuki-san," Sumi said with a smile. "The Junior Monk is a kind man."

Tsurumi nodded. "It's because that man is a monk at heart."

While Mitsuo was setting up the clothing, he nodded in his heart.

Since he was fifteen years old, Mitsuo commuted to the temple, supporting it

from the shadows. Mitsuo himself certainly held no official, ordained post at the temple but, he thought of himself as a part of the temple and his love for it ran deep. The truth of it was that he felt that this temple was his own. Looking at it through the eyes of that Mitsuo who felt it his own, Seishin was a worthy heir to succeed the temple. Gentle and quiet, well mannered, his personality was clean and precise. His detached bearings suited the robes he wore well. He had no imprudent qualities like the successor of the Ozaki Hospital. Nor did he sneer at his father's profession. He found the saying that he was a monk at heart to be very appropriate. As a successor, there was not a single flaw to be found. ---exempting a single old scar.

"He really is," said Ikebe, his mouth distorting slightly. "So even so, why're there people saying such weird things..."

Mitsuo blinked at Ikebe's tone that seemed to really warp the mood.

"Weird things?"

Realizing his verbal slip, he looked about at Mitsuo and the other's faces, voice raising up. "Ah, no, ...that's..."

"Weird things, what might you mean by that?"

"Earlier, I overheard a group that was standing around talking," Ikebe hesitated. "I mean, a little while ago, there was the incident where a foreign car hit a child. They were talking about whether that kind of car was actually there or not.."

"There or not, nothing," Tsurumi said, his eyes wide. "A child was hurt at the scene, wasn't he?"

"He was, but still. The Junior Monk was at the scene and wasn't he the one who had brought him to the hospital? So..."

Understanding what Ikebe was hesitating and finding so hard to say, Mitsuo nodded.

"Yeah. The Junior Monk was put up to it, if he put a story together with them, that kind of talk, right?"

Those rumors had made their way to his ears. Mitsuo worked together with

the parishioners households, so he had an ear for their rumors.

"What do they mean by that," Tsurumi said, seeming to find it unthinkable.

"There are people saying that kind of thing. It isn't as if they mean anything bad by it, they're just irresponsibly letting their imaginations run wild. After all, see, the all-important culprit ultimately went uncaught. A bunch of rumors that it was really the Kanemasa car, hidden on their grounds were going around. It's a part of those rumors."

"Even so, the way it is being said..."

"I'm saying they don't mean anything bad by it. It was a freak accident that it turned into something this big, so maybe the Junior Monk might be covering for them, the neighbors are saying."

"What part of that doesn't mean anything bad?" Ikebe said indignantly. "That's bad will in itself! They should at least know the Junior Monk isn't that kind of---"

"Nowadays, the village isn't made up of just our parish, anymore," Mitsuo said lightly.

If they were temple parishioners, even with careless rumors they wouldn't imply that. At least, not where the temple had ears. In truth, when Mitsuo had heard those rumors he felt it was an insult to the parish itself.

"It just means there're folks who only know the Junior Monk through rumors." Mitsuo deliberately, carefully brushed the dust from Tsurumi's clothing. "On top of that, the Junior Monk might be a little too delicate in some ways. His side job's a little weird, so there're probably some people who have a few strange ideas about him."

As if grasping what Mitsuo was trying to say, Tsurumi gave a sound that seemed slightly like a groan. Ikebe and Sumi didn't seem to notice.

"Even so, Mitsuo-san."

"In the past, the village was all made up of parish families who supported the temple. They weren't just parishioners, way back in the day, the fields and the mountains and everything was borrowed land from the temple. That was all the

more reason for the people to need a two-stone handicap allowance from the temple but the people who came in after that had nothing to do with any of that. Especially since the non-parishioners all came in in the post-war period, in new houses. Looking at it from those bunch's eyes, the temple's a self-important institution revered for no real reason," Mitsuo said, raising his face. Forcing a smile, he nudged Ikebe and the others. "But more importantly, don't you have to be going? The overnight vigil is starting."

Part 2

"Ritsuko-san, would you like to come to lunch with us?"

Isaki Satoko, pulling on her coat, poked her face into the treatment room.

"Today I brought my own lunch. Go on ahead!"

Then, we'll be going, said Satoko waving her hand along with Shiomi Yuki.

Giving them a smile, Ritsuko cleaned up the area around the treatment bed. As she took stock of the remaining supplies, oh, she suddenly remembered that today was Wednesday.

In the treatment room separated by one closed partitioning wall, Yasuyo was cleaning up. Ritsuko called to Yasuyo. "Yasuyo-san, have you seen the the Maebara Obaa-chan?"

Yasuyo was returning the changing bin to its place as she replied; "Maebara Setsu-san? No, I haven't!"

"I didn't think so."

Ritsuko sighed.

"Did something happen with Setsu-san?"

"She came on Saturday for her medicine. I couldn't give it without the doctor giving her an examination, so I told her to be sure to come on Monday, yet Monday and Tuesday both passed without her having come by, I was just thinking."

Yasuyo laughed out "Oh, it's because she hates injections. Well, it isn't like we can put a rope around her neck and drag her in, after all."

Yasuyo lightly patted Ritsuko who sighed 'That's true' as she headed out one step ahead of Ritsuko. Coming out of the meeting room into the hallway, she

caught sight of Seishin peeking in through the side entrance.

"Oh my, Junior Monk."

Sliding open the partitioning door, Seishin politely bowed his head.

"My apologies for interrupting you during the lunch hour but, the salve has run out and so I had come to ask for more. May I?"

Yasuyo laughed. "I don't mind at all. Please, come in. --How is the head monk? In this heat, he must be getting down."

"In spite of the heat he is well. It does not seem his appetite has declined."

"My, that's good to hear. It must be because of the Madame taking such fine care of him." Yasuyo went towards the waiting room. "Come in. I'll bring you some tea in a minute."

"Please don't fuss over me. ---Ah, and we do not have much of the vulnerary cover remaining, but..."

Yes, yes, Yasuyo nodded as she knocked on the waiting room door. "Doctor, the Junior Monk is here."

"Ou," came a careless voice from within. Yasuyo opened the door; inside, Toshio was facing the desk buried in a pile of books.

"If you will wait just a minute. In the mean time, please soothe the doctor down. All day long, his mood's been off."

Leaving behind the wryly smiling Seishin, Yasuyo returned to the hall. Toshio raised his face from the book, cigarette still in his mouth.

"I can't believe it. My own nurse is talking crap about me like that just out of the blue."

Seishin smiled, refraining from commenting.

"And? I'll tell you in advance, if you're here about how they finally moved in, it's a popular time for it."

Told that as soon as he entered the waiting room, Seishin blinked.

"What, that wasn't what you were here for? ---It's that house. Seems like a moving truck came, didn't it?"

"Aa---seems so."

"Thanks to that business's been unusually booming today with people coming in with idle gossip. No, booming as usual, I should be saying, huh?" On the desk before Toshio was a thick, large sized open book. "That someone saw a truck, about what kind of car it was, that the storm doors were open and they saw

some curtains. I'm sure from all that that since this morning the hill's been crammed with sight seers."

Seishin gave a light smile, 'I see.'

"What I can't believe is that it's been no small number that left their front row seats to come all the way here to tell me about it. If they wanna gawk, they could just stay there until the master comes out for the curtain call but no. For some reason they all have to come in here, are they formally reporting the minutes to me or something? Do they think I've got any interest in that kind of thing? The whole bunch of them..."

Seishin didn't say anything in particular. Nor was Toshio really expecting a response, so Seishin knew from years of association with him.

"The Master of the house still hasn't shown himself it seems. The owner's particulars are unknown. It seems their name's Kirishiki but, there's no sign of them putting up a nameplate on the gate. Their cars are a white foreign car and the servant has one wagon-like car. Sorry to say, the old lady that came to report that didn't seem to know the make and model. They have duplex curtains, and you can see a lamp by the window, and then----what else was there?"

"I get it." Seishin ceased to force a smile. In these situations he knew of the villager's burning curiosity all too well.

"Telling me to stop must mean you didn't come to hear about this. ---So, what's up?"

"Father is out of his ointment. Also, vulnerary covers."

Toshio gave a large exhale of cigarette smoke and leaned back deeply in his chair, looking up at the ceiling.

"Wonderful. We're back around to the everyday again, in other words."

"What are you pouting about?"

"Why the hell would I be pouting?"

Seishin smiled and shook his head.

"Did any more reports come in after that about Yamairi?"

The other day, when he had come to ask about it, Toshio had said that they were still waiting on part of the results.

"I'm happy to report it was a perfectly normal response," Toshio laughed. "It's still not complete but, it seems they've arrived at that conclusion one way or

another."

"Acute liver failure?"

"For Old Lady Mieko, yeah. The police didn't think it was a death caused by anything external either, but that said there's no mention of any infectious diseases or anything, so they probably want to wrap it up as neatly as they can."

"I see..."

"But damn, there's something messed up about the people here. They *do* know that in Yamairi three people, *three*, died? I wonder if it's the time to be sticking their neck into the livelihoods of some move-ins. The bunch of them wanted to ask about this and that until yesterday, then a truck comes and it's like whatever about that."

"Everyone thinks of it as someone else's problem."

"That's exactly what it is. But, everyone can die. Like there's such thing as a death that's just someone else's problem," Toshio said breathing a sigh. "When a dead body was found, a fuss kicked up like some kind of festival. No matter how much I try to research the real cause of death, they want to pervert it into a forced double suicide. Or do like the Itou's Ikumi-san and stretch to call it a curse or black magic. It's so serious, it's so serious, they say, they make a face like their own fate is sure to be caught up in it too but, something that serious, important, is just something that gets forgotten in the face of one house, one move-in."

Seishin gave a forced smile. "Everyone is bored. Change is something they welcome. They know it themselves, that really it's nothing at all. Rather, it's precisely because they know that that they're getting what pleasure they can from it to stave off their boredom."

Good grief, Toshio breathed a sigh. Of course, what Seishin had noted was something that Toshio already knew.

As Seishin moved to leave after receiving the medicine, Toshio again took up his medical bag and stepped out of the hospital. Seishin gave him a dubious look, causing Toshio to turn a challenging eye to him as he stepped out of the back entrance.

"I have to check on the Gotouda Baa-san's condition, don't I? After all she's still got the funeral after this. She's at that age and all, and then there's this heat, she looked like she was being done in," Toshio said, thrusting a finger at Seishin.

"So I'm telling you, don't get the wrong idea that I'm some volunteer doctor overflowing with compassion. I just want to see if there's any need for medical treatment for one of my patients, just so you know."

Seishin's wry smile slipped out despite himself. As he stepped onto the Maruyasu saw mill lumber yard, Toshio's voice rose; 'whassis?' Following his line of sight, on there was a person walking along the road on the edge of the hospital grounds. His age was approximately mid-twenties, and he took notice of Seishin and the other man, suddenly smiling and bowing his head.

"I finally found someone. ---Excuse me, where am I?" the young man asked brightly. Toshio stood in shock as the man approached.

"Let me guess, I think you're someone from the Kirishiki family, but."

"I am. Nice to meet you."

"In that case, keep going down this road until you come to another one. Take a right turn onto it and then if you go right again you'll be at the bottom of the slope."

Ah, that's it, the young man mumbled. "I am sorry for having troubled you. ---Ozaki-san, isn't it?"

Toshio raised a brow; the man looked towards the building beside the road.

"I had seen the two of you coming out of there towards here. This is the Ozaki Hospital, isn't it? And I see that only one of you happen to be in a white coat and carrying a medical satchel."

Toshio looked to Seishin. "Looks like we've had a master detective move in, oi."

He said, then to him. "As you have most brilliantly deduced, I am Ozaki.

Technically I'm something of a doctor so if something happens, by all means. If you can call me while there's still work for me to do, I'd appreciate it. If there's no part for me, it'll be him you're going to."

He tilted his head. "Is this gentleman also a doctor?"

Seishin shot a glare at Toshio's joke, but Toshio flippantly laughed it off.

"Nah, he's a monk."

Ah, Tatsumi laughed. "I see, you, sir, are from the temple atop the mountain! I am called Tatsumi."

"I am Muroi."

Toshio invited Tatsumi in, opening the gate of branches they had just come through. "Well, how about some tea at least? You don't wanna stand around

here getting bitten by the bugs, right?"

"But, your house call?"

"What're you saying. It's not like I was called out specifically. The people here seem to like the monk better than me, so I just thought I'd try to cut in before the monk's turn, that's all. I've got time. Besides," Toshio laughed. "I don't have enough burning curiosity to go sightseeing when someone moves in but, now that I've finally met someone who lives there, I'm not devoid of curiosity enough to just see him off without a word."

For some reason the big mass of people that gathered made me nervous, Tatsumi said. "It isn't that I hate it in particular but, somehow I'm not sure just how to handle them."

Opening the sliding dust door to the waiting room, Seishin and Tatsumi knelt down. Toshio sat down on the ground cross legged, lining up the three glasses of barley tea on the tray brought in before by the surprised looking nurse Ritsuko.

"There's no other entertainment in this village. They'll be treating you like rare breeds for a while. It'd be best to keep that in mind."

I see, Tatsumi laughed. "I thought I would go investigate what the village has and doesn't. So, I went out the back door and walked along a slim path that didn't seem to have anybody on it. I thought that if I followed it around far enough it would come out to the village, but."

"It's not that it doesn't come out at least. Actually, this is right where it comes out at."

"Ah, then, it was good that I had taken that road."

"The road that goes in front of your place, that one's a woodland path that eventually goes up the mountain. It doesn't go anywhere in particular, it just disappears into the mountain. If you go down the side road, it comes out at the back of the paddy fields at the back of the sawmill. You'll just come to some foot paths between the fields but, it is in fact a road."

Tatsumi bit back a smile. "Indeed, it is."

"Country roads are a mix of forest paths and farm roads and paddy field roads and all that. Well, you'll get used to it quick. As long as you don't go over the ridges, no matter where you walk from where, you'll end up in the village."

"That is a positive point, isn't it!"

"Let's set aside that kind of flattery. It's not exactly good or bad, it's just the country. What're you doing, moving all the way out here to the country like this. ---From now on, you're going to be asked this by everyone here and there, so it'd be better to prepare your answer."

Tatsumi gave a simmering smile. "It was not my decision, so, maybe I should say that I do not know, myself."

"That won't fly. Aren't you a member of the Kirishiki household too?"

"If you mean that I live in their house. But, I am but a simple servant."

Heh, Toshio blinked. "You're not family? I was sure Tatsumi sounded like a first name, but."

Tatsumi smiled lightly. "Kirishiki Tatsumi, eh---Not bad at all. But, Tatsumi is my surname. I am but a simple live-in servant. I'm in charge of physical labor or perhaps you'd say the general handiman."

"Mind if I ask about the family set-up?"

"There is the Master, the Madame, and the young lady. You could say the Master is retired. He was formerly the president of a company but just last year he retired."

"And on to a life of dignified luxury? That's an enviable story. How old's Kirishiki-shi?"

Saa, Tatsumi tilted his head. "I've not formally asked him but about his mid-forties, I think?"

"That's young. For retirement, I mean."

"So it is. The likes of myself wouldn't know the intricacies of the situation but, if I hazard a guess, it might be that a current stock holder who inherited his shares can't do much with the company. It's just, the reason that he made such a sudden decision was for the Madame, his wife and the young lady, his daughter. This may be related to why they had moved but, the two of them are quite frail."

"An illness is it?"

"Yes. That is why it was best to seek a peaceful, quiet place to move to. And, as there had been nobody living on this property, the asking price was fair, I'm told."

"I get it. ---This is something I'm asking more out of a sense of obligation as a doctor than out of curiosity but, what's wrong with his wife and daughter?"

"Are you familiar with SLE?" Tatsumi said, Toshio making an unusually serious expression.

"I know it. ...I see, that's tough." Perhaps sensing that Seishin was tilting his head at least in his thoughts, Toshio explained. "It's a type of incurable disease. There's a skin affection, joint pain, and then kidney and heart failure too, wasn't there? I know there's light sensitivity, too, isn't there?"

"That's right," Tatsumi nodded. "That is why, when they do go out from time to time, they are heavily dressed in hats, coats, and gloves. Especially on summer days like this, yes? But, being in the city, that's painful. Even though there are so many places to go out to, they cannot go out as they'd like. So it may have been better to move out to someplace where there was nothing at all to do, to live in quiet peace in the house, but, my, how rude of me."

Toshio laughed. "That's just how it is."

"And for some time now, I believe the master had wished to withdraw. Where we were, various matters were piling in and weighing on him, leading to such a decision, I'm sure. Passing on the company, sorting out business. It's just, he does so love his house, so."

"So he had it reconstructed. I see, if it wasn't for those circumstances, he probably wouldn't move out to the sticks like this."

But, Tatsumi said. "It is indeed a small place but, it seems to be to everybody's liking. The Lady is very happy that there's a hospital. Although, we do have a doctor, but."

"A doctor? In the house?"

"Yes. He is an elderly gentleman called Ebuchi-san, but. He passed on his hospital to his son and had retired some time ago. The gentleman sees to the care of the Madame and the young lady. He doubles as the young lady's home-tutor in a way as well, kind of."

"How old's the young lady?"

"She is thirteen. Technically she would be a first year middle school student but, with her illness, school is generally, well, you know."

Yeah, Toshio mumbled.

"But, even if we have a doctor, it isn't as if we have the equipment. If she suddenly takes a turn for the worse and her illness becomes a matter of life and death, it's reassuring to have a hospital so nearby. Actually, when we'd heard

from Takemura-san that there was a hospital here, it seems the decision to move was sealed."

"That's a heavy responsibility on me," Toshio said with a strained smile. "I'll take care to study up."

"We'll be depending on you."

"Then, there's the three in the family, you the servant, a doctor, summing up to five people?"

"There's one housekeeper. A sum of six people."

Hmm, Toshio hummed as Seishin looked to his wristwatch and stood.

"Then, I must be going. I have work to do."

Toshio explained to Tatsumi who looked up questioningly. "We had a death in the village. So he'll have to head off to the funeral. On the way to saying my condolences, I thought I'd stop in on the surviving younger sister. She is an old girl, she's sure to be feeling down."

Well then, said Tatsumi standing up quickly. "My apologies. Keeping you caught up in talk."

"It's fine. If you're all right with this kind of cheap tea, come in to drink again."

Thank you, Tatsumi said bowing his head. He showed a very cheerful smile as he spoke. "I'll have to be getting back too! Sorry again for the intrusion!"

Part 3

"Hey, Tatsu-san. Yesterday, a young'un from Kanemasa appeared at the Ozaki Clinic, did you hear?" said Satou Oitarou as he approached.

Every day for ten years straight just like so, Tatsu sat at her shop front and gazed at the village road. The weather was the same as usual. The road top's reflection was dazzling.

"The young'un from Kanemasa. ...I wonder if that wasn't the young'un who asked directions at Chigusa?"

"Wasn't it, I wonder. Going by the rumors, it looks like he's the only young man they have."

Oh, Tatsu gave a curt reply and returned to watching the village road. It

wasn't that she had no interest in the move-ins. If she showed her interest candidly, Oitarou was the type to become stingy with information. Just the opposite, if she kept it short, he would just spit out everything that he knew, so she knew from experience.

As expected, Oitarou took up the seat nearest Tatsu, leaning his body forward. "So it seems, they have the man, his wife and their daughter, a three person family. They say the wife and daughter's bodies are weak. So that is why they ended up moving to the country, it sounds like. The young'un, a helper girl, and a doctor are there it sounds like. He's their personal family physician."

"Heeh..."

Talk about extravagance. It made sense, they had enough to dismantle and rebuild a house like that one. But, Tatsu didn't like it. More than anything, in the first place, she wondered why they moved in in the middle of the night. And she heard it was a truck and two passenger vehicles. That was probably the lot that had come to move in during the mushiokuri.

(but, if so I wonder why they turned back, then.)

She wasn't satisfied. That wasn't all. Now that they'd moved in, the owner hadn't shown himself, and she didn't like that either. There were rumors he'd been sighted but Tatsu herself and all of the old people who gathered there had never laid eyes on him. Moving in in the middle of the night was bad enough, as if trying to avoid her notice, which was plain boorish of them. If they had moved to their new house in the middle of the day, they would have had to enter the village by passing by her post before Takemura. And then, going out to the obvious house, someone out of the old folks who had too much time to spare would have met them. If that happened, that someone would come straight here and fork over the news, and yet..! Tatsu had always done like this, sitting here as she did and yet she was well informed about everything relating to the village. And yet when it came to the man of the house at Kanemasa, they managed to slip out beyond her line of sight.

(I don't like it....)

Oitarou might have felt the same way, somehow making an unamused expression.

"What's with them, the bunch from that house, being so sneaky, anyway."

"It isn't as if they're being particularly sneaky, really."

"You think? It sure feels like it, don't it? Voice unheard, sight unseen, doesn't it feel like that to you, Tatsu-san?"

It feels exactly like that, Tatsu thought but did not respond. With a sulking expression, Oitarou wiped at the sweat that rose up. As he did, a smile bearing ill will rose on his face.

"Well, with this we know that Ikumi-san's weird predictions were off. That girl said that the master had some bad fortune and couldn't move in, or something like that, she was saying. Right about now there's probably no end to her embarrassment, I bet she's regretting it."

Tatsu furrowed her brows.

"She was just using guesswork to say whatever she wanted, to hear herself talk. To start with whatever comes out of her mouth is random anyway, so it was all incoherent enough to start with."

"Hahaa."

"She'll miss the mark and miss it again, then she'll make up some more as if she's not embarrassed at all, make with whatever weird connections to it all just pop into her head, that's how her mind works."

No mistaking it, Oitarou laughed.

Natsuno was rummaging in the refrigerator when his mother and father returned from the workshop. Time for their break, Natsuno wondered, looking at the kitchen clock.

"What, having a between meal snack?" Azusa asked, poking her head into the kitchen. Not really, said Natsuno, taking out the bottle of barley tea.

"Bring us some, too."

Yeah, yeah, Natsuno mumbled. He took out three glasses from the cupboard and poured the tea.

"While you're there, bring the grapes too. --Hey, Natsuno-kun, did you hear

the talk about the move-in?"

"No. Someone moved in?"

"Looks like it. Before, one of the people I ran into passing through the neighborhood came to report about it."

Hnn, Natsuno murmured, washing the grapes and putting them on a plate. He set it out on the dinning table. His mother who sat waiting in her chair asked him to put ice in it, sending him back with the glass.

"You can do it yourself."

"You're up, aren't you? Please."

Breathing out one sigh, Natsuno put the ice in as his dad washed his hands beside him.

"There's a big fuss in the village. Even though it's just someone moving in, I've got to wonder if it's worth all that big a deal."

Azusa laughed. "What, don't you think it's kind of cute, in a childish way. I'm sure when we moved in, it was like this too, I bet."

"I bet," Yuuki sighed. "Even so, until just a little while ago, they were making a fuss about the incident in Yamairi. Now that someone's moved in, that's all there is."

"They's just simpleminded. Isn't it more charming like this? It's less of a crime than talking about Yamairi."

Well yeah, Yuuki said sitting in a chair. "It was a freak, it was a forced double suicide, the theories were flying, just how big of an incident did they expect to have happened?"

"And in the end it was a natural death wasn't it,at Yamairi."

"Sounds like that's what the doctor of the Ozaki's is saying. That man did stand in on the autopsies."

"Then there's no doubt about it is there. Finding three dead bodies at once would whip everyone up, I understand that but it wasn't worth that much of a fuss, was it."

"Well they did think it was a major incident. Three people found dead isn't something you'd call ordinary. Yamairi was isolated in the mountains. The three inhabitants were all elderly. Those old people were decimated and nobody noticed. The bodies were never even discovered until things got to that point. I mean, a villager tried to go by to report on the death of another family member when the body was found, but if that hadn't happened, just when would they have been found?"

"That's true..."

"Even in a village with as many old people as this one, this is the extent of their preparations. I think this is a problem, don't you? I think that there should be more of a network to protect the elderly. Even in a village full of nothing but old people, the elderly are still isolated. Seen as unnecessary, their relationship to the people around them dwindles gradually, and they end up alone. If you don't take part in society, you won't be reached by its protections."

"There is something like that. An elderly association or some network of lonely old folks."

"This proves that it was insufficient."

That's true, Azusa nodded.

"I think that what happened in Yamairi is something, is several somethings to think about. Well, for the villagers, it's something already done and over though. Despite being a collective community, things are unexpectedly flippant."

"That's true. I thought it'd be more----should I say substantial, the connections between people."

"Well, Yamairi has geographic factors to it as well. Even so, I'm not sure what to think about it being passed over just because people are moving in."

"Doesn't it depend on who it is moving in? At any rate, they did reconstruct a house like that, they moved in in the dead of night, they're quite showy. They were made to be talked about."

"That said, I haven't heard anything about them showing themselves."

"Oh but it sounds like there are people who have seen them. I've heard little rumors that someone had."

"I wonder about that, too." Yuuki once again sighed. "Now that they've finally moved in, I'd think they would want to at least greet the people nearby, but. They did take the trouble to move all the way out into a small collective like this. I don't know what I think about that kind of behavior, cloistering themselves up as if to ignore their own surroundings."

"That's true..."

Listening to Azusa's murmur, Natsuno washed out the glass he had used. Just as he'd quietly started out of the kitchen, his father's voice called to him, asking if he was going out.

Yeah, replied Natsuno without turning around. "I'm going to the Mutous'."

As usual, outside the weather was annoyingly sunny. Walking while being awash in the sun's rays, a disconcerted Natsuno thought to himself, what the hell?

The old people of Yamairi were isolated. It was true enough that they were cut off from any network. There was nobody left in regular contact with them, nor anyone who visited them. That was just why three people, three dead people, weren't found until they were already dead.

But, the old people had to consent to being isolated themselves. They must have understood that they had ended up in a condition of isolation, and they must have been only all too aware that they were also geographically isolated. They should have also understood what might have happened being in advanced age. In spite of all that, they decided to stay in Yamairi.

If they were afraid of isolation, they should have taken steps so as not to be isolated. Just as Azusa was saying, there was an organization for the elderly in town, and a network so that the old people living alone could watch over each other in their daily lives. If they feared solitude, they could have proactively been a member of that, and in not doing as much, the old people in Yamairi knowingly choose their isolation. If the people themselves didn't wish for isolation, regardless of whether they were trying to make contact with society or not, then if they couldn't, it'd be a problem. But that was only one possibility.

The other was that this was the old people's will.

He understood his father's ideals but he didn't understand the reason why other people should have to embrace and worry about people who had no personal desire to escape isolation. Overall, his disagreements with his father were of that nature. If the person themselves chose a lonely life, the results, as inconvenient as they may be, were consented to and accepted. Shouldn't they have known, Natsuno thought. It wasn't as if the old people didn't know themselves that they were isolated, and if perhaps they never realized the dangers inherent to it, regardless, they didn't make any moves to sweep away that isolation or its dangers, --or possibly in the one in a million chance they just never really thought about it, then it would still mean that those people themselves were just fools. He couldn't understand why others should have to swarm them and worry about them.

"...It's not any of your damn business."

That was how Natsuno felt. If you wanted to live like a fool and die like a fool, have at it. That was the person in question's freedom of choice. To say nothing of the fact that the old folks may have been fully aware all of that, and that still they may have chosen as they did, so he thought. Three isolated old people's bodies were destroyed, and it may have been strange that they didn't seek any outside assistance but, as mysterious as it was that the old people sought no help---the reason may have been that the old folks already felt as if the people living in the village called Sotoba were like complete strangers---that was a view he'd never heard uttered.

(Even that house.)

Natsuno's feet stopped. He turned around and looked at the majesty of the Kanemasa mansion in the middle of the green slope.

Whether he wanted to give his greetings or not, wasn't that up to the inhabitants too, he felt. If one had the freedom to move out into the country seeking territorial bonds and proactively mingling with the villagers, then one also had the freedom to move only seeking a quiet environment, the freedom to refuse annoying and troublesome assistance.

(How to put it...)

He was convinced justice and good sense were always on his side, that was the impression Natsuno always had from his father. While calling himself an advocate and protector of freedom and human rights, his father was indifferent towards his son's free will. Natsuno had no such privileges as taking to any conduct his father deemed a "folly." Natsuno had to wonder if his father at least had an understanding of the way he himself invalidated Natsuno's own free will so forcefully.

With a heavy sigh he stepped onto the Mutou family property. Before he could peek inside from the veranda, a voice came down from above.

"Yo."

From the second story window, Mutou Tamotsu waved his hand. With a nod he let himself in and went up the steps. Tamotsu's room was boiling with hot air hanging heavy in the room, and with Tohru and even Murasako Masao there, the population density was high. All of them had stripped the upper half of their bodies, dripping with sweat; it was indeed sultry.

"What is this, a sauna."

Tamotsu laughed at Natsuno's complaint.

"Hygienic, isn't it? Be thankful, you. In the city, they pay good money to go to the sauna."

"Is there anyone who'd pay to come to a run down sauna like this? The competition's stiff out there."

"Punk," Tamotsu said giving Natsuno a light kick. "That reminds me, you heard?"

Seeing Tamotsu's excitement, Natsuno sighed. "Kanemasa, right. Looks like they moved in."

How old a story is that, Tamotsho laughed. "That's two day old talk now, isn't it? Your news isn't the freshest. ---Not that, yesterday, they came to Masao's place."

"They came?"

Masao looked somehow triumphant as he smiled. "The younger one from Kanemasa. He showed his face in our shop. He came to ask if we do deliveries."

Natsuno let out a faint sigh. Masao's house was a rice shop. It wasn't strange that someone who'd moved in would come to ask that.

"You're so grateful they came in that you're bragging about it?"

Masao's expression became sullen. "It's not like I was bragging about it."

"Really?" Natsuno took a spot by the window, resting his chin on the window still. "You're really starved for a topic. Like the fuss over Yamairi. People getting old and kicking the bucket, people who just moved in showing their faces, are those that unusual?"

Masao's mouth twisted at Natsuno's irritated tone.

"Well sorry. For being so country."

Masao's words were turned back at him.

"That you've got a complex like that about it is proof you're country."

Masao fell further into a sulk but Tamotsu waved his hand laughing that there was no doubt about it. What are you laughing about, you're being made fun off, why aren't you mad, Masao said with a glare at Tamotsu's happy go lucky face. Tohru and Tamotsu were always like this. That's why Natsuno could be so arrogant. He was a person of Sotoba now too, so he should be educated in how things went in Sotoba, but no.

"You act like you're older than me or something."

You're impertinent for being younger than me, was what Masao had meant to imply but, Natsuno's response was curt.

"It's just that you're a bratty kid."

Masao glared at Natsuno. He somehow repressed his desire to yell. Because he was like this, because he was so unpleasant, Masao thought secretly clutching his fist as he stood. Tamotsu looked up at him, still with a happy go lucky expression. "What's up? Going to the bathroom?"

"I'm going home. The air's gone bad."

Masao glanced at Natsuno. He took his shirt and headed out of his room with loud footsteps. Natsuno watched his back as he left.

"What the hell is with that guy."

Tohru forced a smile. "It's because you wouldn't get on board with Masao's bragging."

"It's just talk about how he saw the move-ins, so why should I have to listen to him like it's a treat to hear it?"

"That's what they call getting along. Even if you're not interested, you pretend like you are at least. If you're like that from here on, when you're out in the world it's going to be a hard time."

"It's my hard time so leave it alone. And? The guy who glares and makes an exit when someone won't get on board with his boasting won't have a hard time?"

Tohru pushed against his forehead, giving an inappropriate laugh. "Well, he'll have problems, too. Masao's got something spoiled about him. Any time something not too fun happens, he gets like that."

"...Hn."

"He's the youngest of his siblings. And his older brother has a pretty big age difference on him. He's what you'd call a Child of Shame."

"How old was Munetaka-san again? Isn't he already in his mid thirties? There's not too much of a difference between him and the second brother, so it's about a fifteen year difference, isn't there?"

"It's sixteen," Tamotsu interjected. "So he was always coddled by his mom. Though, his mother's died. But that's why he doesn't like it when things don't go his way."

"How stupid can you get?"

"Yeah, well." Tohru forced a smile. "In the first place things are distorted when you compare him to them. The first two sons of that house turned out great. If you compare them, he comes off pretty menial, doesn't he? And on top of that, Masao was raised spoiled, he doesn't have the magnanimity to accept

that comparison head-on."

"No, I meant the excuses Tohru-chan's giving for him are idiotic."

"Oi, oi."

"He's selfish because he's an only child or he was spoiled because he was the youngest or whatever, those're the prevailing explanations. Are you saying anyone raised in the same circumstances would definitely turn out like him? Humans are individuals, you know. Cutting that to as minimal as you want and ignoring the individual to wrap them up in some image is stupid, is what I'm saying."

Now come on, you, Tamotsu sighed. "Aren't we always backing you up? While we casually follow Masao's lead, we're also supporting you. That's what they call tact."

"You sure you don't mean 'talking behind someone's back'? I don't need such a petty ally."

".....Hey, you, keep up that attitude and one of these days someone's going to knife you."

"If there's somebody with the guts to do it, bring it on."

Honestly, Tohru laughed. Putting aside whether Natsuno's was right or wrong, the fact that he could casually fire off things like that was what made Natsuno Natsuno.

Natsuno looked to the window, disinterested. His line of sight fell ahead to the Kanemasa mansion. "What did they move out here for, anyway. ...Just curious."

He said it as if talking to himself.

"Something like the wife and the daughter have health problems, it seems like. So they moved out into the country, Masao was saying before."

So that's it, Natsuno said with a sigh. "If it weren't for that, who'd come here."

While he one-sidedly understood their reason, he felt a hint of loneliness. Natsuno didn't have any reason like that. There were neither territorial nor blood ties, there was no reason at all that he had to enter into the village's

social sphere. But, his parents decided, and that was that. There was not one single reason for Natsuno to be here. Yet he was caught in Sotoba, and its curse grew stronger with time. Somewhere in him he harbored the feeling that if he didn't shake it off, he would never get out of Sotoba.

"Too bad huh, that they won't be your allies."

As if he'd been seen through, Natsuno wore a severe scowl. "It's not like I wanted friends in particular. ---Tohru-chan, you're pretty calm. Guess it's to be expected of an adult?"

"That's not really it or anything. I just mean it's got nothing to do with me, that house."

"Hnn?"

"Living in a house like that and all, they're probably eccentrics. I can't picture being able to get on with them like easy going neighbors, and in the first place I don't really think I'd want to mingle with them either. It'd be one thing if they had a girl the right age, but they say the daughter's about thirteen or somewhere around there."

"That's your real goal, huh."

Tohru laughed. "It doesn't seem like they've got any interest in knowing us either, and I don't really want to know them especially. In the future there probably won't be anything we'll meet over. So, they don't have anything to do with me at all."

Natsuno laughed. "That's true enough."

"Say, the one who saw the person from Kanemasa first, wasn't that you, Kanami-san?"

Kanami sighed and wondered how many customers had come through the entrance saying that. Tanaka Sachiko and Shimizu Tsuruko who had entered took their places at the counter, eyes expectant as they stared at Kanami. She understood their expectations but since yesterday she'd told the same story how many times? Enough already, Kanami was fed up.

Losing to Sachiko and Tsuruko's stares, Kanami summed up that the inhabitants of Kanemasa asked her for directions. At her side as she spoke was Motoko, who she knew was tensing up. Motoko was uneasy. The feeling that outsiders had come made her cower into herself.

When did Motoko start showing such worry for her children that bordered on neurosis? She had a feeling she hadn't always been this way. At least, when she'd left the village, when she'd seen her off to live the married life in town, Motoko hadn't been like this. Since they had only talked on the phone now and then, not seeing each other as constantly as they did now, maybe it just didn't show on the surface. But, when she'd first divorced and returned to the village, she couldn't help thinking she hadn't been like that, either. When did that start, and through the years didn't it seem like it was becoming more serious?

While Sachiko and Tsuruko were goading and teasing out more details with no small effort, Motoko finished her washing and looked up to the clock. She quickly removed her apron and folded it up. "Well then... I have dinner preparations to make."

Kanami smiled and nodded, calling out see you later. Motoko's face was implacably stiff, and she only returned the nod.

Watching Motoko leave the store, Kanami turned back to Sachiko and Tsuruko. "Don't talk so much about Kanemasa around her! Motoko gets anxious about them."

Oh my, Tsuruko said, her eyes widening. "Anxious about them---what do you mean?"

Kanami hesitated. Explaining Motoko's unease was going to take time and effort.

"Because," Kanami smiled. "Just a while back, Motoko's child was in a hit and run, you remember. It wasn't a big deal but there were rumors that that car was the Kanemasa car, you know."

"Well, dear me."

"Of course it's just a rumor, and they didn't move into Kanemasa around that time. But, if he'd been hit worse, it could have become something much more

serious. It probably wasn't Kanemasa but, we don't really have any proof of that. Just the fact that the culprit got away means that of course Motoko can't help worrying about it."

"This is the first I'd heard of it! My, how terrible."

Yeah, well, Kanami said, hazily.

"That isn't good for Kanemasa," Sachiko said. "If there are rumors like that, it won't do for them not to come out more."

"The people at Kanemasa probably haven't even thought in their dreams that there'd be a rumor like that."

"Even so! Didn't they move in and then burrow up in there without a word of greeting? Well, I just don't know what to think of that. Someone ought to have a word with them, to tell them that that's no good!"

Tsuruko laughed. "Who would possibly tell them something like that? Nobody even knows them, much less is their friend, and they're supposed to visit their house and say that to them?"

"Oh, just call it a courtesy call. Say that it's the neighbor's association contacting them, just make up something. If you say you were just dropping by to say hello, why, who could get mad at that."

Tsuruko looked as if her curiosity had been sparked. "That might just work, that might."

I don't think we need to go that far, Kanami thought, but choose not to interrupt. She understood Sachiko and Tsuruko's curiosity. To start with they rebuilt a strange house, they were the ones to stir the flames of curiosity around themselves, so what choice did they have but to put up with some meddling from the people like this.

"They have a daughter too don't they? Perhaps we could get someone from the Naka-Sotoba PTA to talk to them. She will be going to the village's primary school or middle school, won't she?"

"Oh, but I heard she's frail and may not go to school."

Heeh, Kanami said, looking to Tsuruko. "Is that so?"

"Yup. They said that a young man who was like a servant of the house showed up at the Murasako rice shop. That's what that person said, it sounds like. A while ago when I was shopping, Chizuko-san told me so. She has some kind of illness, and they have a doctor in the house who looks over her. It's incurable, it sounds like. The mother and daughter, both of them have it."

"Oh my... That's just terrible. That's why they moved out here to the countryside."

"That's what it looks like."

Seemingly caught up in her thoughts for a moment, Sachiko clapped her hands. "All the more reason, we could say we'd heard about that, and make an offer. The PTA will offer to help out in getting their daughter to go to school just as much as she is able."

"Ah, that's right," Tsuruko nodded. "That really might be better to ask them about. If she is going to school, she may need some assistance after all."

"Mightn't she? Maybe I should ask Koike-san from Naka-Sotoba to try talking to them!"

Nodding while looking at Tsuruko, in her mind Kanami sighed. It might have been an inflammatory thought but, she was developing some sympathies for the move-ins. It was clear that things were going to be made difficult for them for a while.

Part 4

Shimizu Megumi hurried down the small pathway as the crickets chirped.

It was a narrow path that followed the western mountain ridges from Shimo-Sotoba passing through Sotoba towards Monzen. There were fewer people she knew that way, so while she thought nobody would talk to her, in the end she did end up meeting someone, and she ended up caught by them again. She'd pass on having to talk to some old person with too much free time. She basically knew what they were going to say. Seems sometime they moved in, they'd say, or if not that, they'd make her listen about how someone died in

Yamairi, and they'd finish it off by butting into her affairs like their talk was a cautionary tale.

(Who even cares?)

All humans died. And there were tons of old people in the village. People dying was something happening all the time every day. ---It was just something that usually happened somewhere they weren't seeing, that's all.

The adults were saying the community of Yamairi was gone now, making a big fuss over that but the likes of Yamairi were already gone a long time ago. Even now everyone seemed to have forgotten it again. It wasn't anything to make a fuss over now, she thought.

Even Megumi had the feeling something huge had happened when the dead people were found in Yamairi. It was in the papers and on TV, she had the feeling an extravagant change was going to take place but, nothing like that happened after all, and once she thought about it, even if it was in the papers or on TV, it was the local edition, the local news, so from the start it really wasn't that big of a thing at all.

(In the end, weren't we just happy something unusual happened!)

Even while their eyes glistened with rumors of something greater, they paid lip service to it as sad, as if they had compassion or something. Even though nobody at all really thought it was sad at all. Yet if Megumi just honestly said she wasn't interested, they made a face as if looking down on her.

(Stupid town!)

It was so totally stupid. If something didn't have anything to do with you, that's what you'd call unrelated to you. Those unrelated people made a face as if the dead were once long time friends of theirs or something. She wanted to tell off the people making too much of a fuss over it. That they didn't have anything to do with them.

(And it's got nothing to do with me!)

It had nothing to do with Megumi. As for what did have something to do with her, on the other hand----.

Megumi rounded the corner and looked up at the slope. Yesterday in the middle of the night, someone saw a truck go in, so went a rumor already rushing through the village. All the same, nobody had set sights on the owners. At least, Megumi had only heard rumors that someone had been seen, she didn't know of anyone who'd actually met with anyone yet. Giving the expected greetings to the neighborhood, coming down to see the state of the village for the time being, it seemed they hadn't done either. There was the possibility that they were simply busy finishing up with moving but, it may have been all to certain that the master didn't have much of a mind to proactively mingle with the village. Thus, Megumi had yet to hear any details of the inhabitants.

In the village full of nothing but stupid things, only that house held any meaning to Megumi. At the end of the day, she was nothing but another one of the masses to that house, Megumi knew as much and yet until that was firmly determined and left her dejected, she couldn't help but hold expectations.

She didn't want to feel dejected. She didn't even want to imagine that the people who moved in wouldn't be interesting to her, that they themselves would hold no interest in her, that she would be shut out.

(That shouldn't happen....)

Looking up at the hill as if it would bite into her, Megumi coached herself. If you love this house this much, then you should definitely come to like the people in that house just the same. The owners definitely won't think the worst of someone like you, Megumi!

(Isn't that right?)

Caught up in her thoughts as she gazed upwards, when a voice suddenly called out to her, Megumi jumped.

"Megumi-chan!"

When she turned around, Kaori was coming, bringing her dog. As Megumi cast her eyes on her, Kaori waved her hand hugely. The dog Kaori brought was a stupid-faced looking mutt. It had a joke of a name like Love or something.

(If that house keeps a dog, I'm sure it's a foreign breed! An intrepid-like one.)

Megumi gave a longing look to the house.

"Today's hot again, isn't it? --Taking a walk?" Kaori said, following Megumi's gaze up the hill. "What's wrong, did you have some kind of business with that house?"

"There's no way I could, right?"

Embarrassed by something somehow, Megumi quickly turned from the hill. Kaori hurried to follow along, earning a sidelong glance from Megumi.

(What a dopy braid. At least use more than a rubber band, you could do a ribbon or something! And she just threw on a T-shirt!)

Kaori was one year younger than Megumi, and her house was nearby. Their mothers were friends too. Until last year they went to the same middle school. This year, Megumi started high school, and though Kaori was left with her last year of middle school, she came every morning to invite her to go to school together. Even though it wasn't like Megumi ever said anything like let's go together, she loyally came every morning like it was only natural. As Megumi took her time slowly getting ready, even while saying "I'm going to leave you behind!" and the like, she waited. At times like that, Kaori's face looked a lot like a dog's.

It was already set in stone that she would go to school together with Megumi. Going to the high school, even by bus, took thirty minutes, so for Kaori who went to the middle school in the village, there shouldn't have been any need to hurry out of the house so early. That she could just say to that: "It's fine, don't worry about it! It's perfect for me because I can prepare for class!" or something and expect her to be grateful was, in a word, stunning.

"Did you hear the rumors, that they'd moved in?" Kaori said, Megumi nodding. Kaori turned to look up the slope as she walked. From where the two were walking, they could no longer see the gate. What they could see were only the second story and the roof. Still, Megumi had the small sense that something about it had been ruined.

"They say they have a daughter, huh?"

As Kaori spoke, Megumi came to a stop. "A daughter? They have one?"

Uh huh, Kaori nodded. "That's what I heard. But, she's younger than us. She's

in sixth grade or in middle school--somewhere around there."

Megumi's feelings were complicated. While she was happy that they had a daughter but, if she was younger then she had the feeling that she was out of luck. And that Kaori knew about it when she didn't wasn't even funny.

".....Oh."

"A husband, a wife and a daughter. A three person family. The old ladies in the neighborhood were talking about it."

"Hnnn.... And?"

"And?"

"So, what kind of people are they?"

I don't know, Kaori shook her head. "I mean, I only overheard what they were standing around talking about. I'm not really that interested, I was just passing by."

"Not interested?" Megumi asked in shock, shocking Kaori herself.

"Megumi-chan, you're interested?"

"That's... Of course I am!"

"Even though they're so weird."

"Weird? Why would you say that!"

Kaori tilted her head at Megumi's cross-examination. Megumi, one year older, had been her friend since kindergarten but, at times she could be cold. Like now.

"Because... Didn't they move in in the middle of the night? Normally you wouldn't move in at that time of night."

"They could have a perfectly good reason for that."

I guess they could, Kaori murmured. "...But their house is weird."

"And I'm asking why you'd say that."

"It doesn't fit, does it, that house, this place."

"That's Sotoba's fault for being so country, isn't it."

But building a house like that out in this county is in itself was weird, Kaori had thought that, but it seemed Megumi didn't see it that way.

"It's kind of oppressive and dark and all..." Kaori said, earning a severely sharp glare for Megumi, her stare turning towards her scornfully. "...If I lived in that house, I'd get depressed."

"It's not like it's your house, so who cares!" Megumi's voice spoke as if thrusting at her as she turned about storming back.

"What's wrong? Did you have another fight with your mom?"

Megumi only gave a single look back at Kaori, without an answer. She promptly returned to the hill, and with only that fleeting look back to Kaori she ascended the slope. Kaori watched her, flabbergasted. They really had known each other a long time, but sometimes she just couldn't make sense of her.

Kaori spoke with a sigh to Love who had stopped at her feet with her. "I wonder if something happened to Megumi?"

The dog let out a disinterested yawn.

Megumi furiously stormed the hill. That country hick, she thought, the world swirling in her chest.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Uncouth inhabitants in an uncouth village. They didn't feel any embarrassment about themselves. No, not just that, they thought they were fine as they were!

That house was too good for this village. And yet the people weren't embarrassed before it, they blamed the house for being weird! Just like how they laughed at Megumi for changing her clothes even when just going out to the shops around town.

(It's not that house that's weird, it's you all that are weird!)

Taking her dog out on a walk in just whatever house clothes she threw on. If she didn't care about her appearances, it was because the village was an extension of her house. The whole village was thought of like one's yard, like

extended family. People went into other's houses as if it were natural, telling other people how to live their lives as if they were family.

"I haaate this village!"

But Megumi was a prisoner of this village. Even though she wanted out she couldn't leave. Just like this she'd find a job in the village, marry somebody from the village, and become a part of it. --That was the one thing she'd pass on.

She wanted to go to college, wanted to work in the city. But her family and the neighbors around preached unanimously that girls were best off at home.

(It's the worst!)

Hunched in anger as she climbed the slope, Megumi raised her face up. Looking up at the house, she let it all out with a breath.

(The gate is...)

The hill pathway curved in front of the house, the gate positioned facing the front as if to cut off the road. A white wall with brick gate piers, the black metal fixtures over the amber boards of the gate, standing in the way of the road, that blocked off one's view, was slightly ajar.

The gap was only about five centimeters. Through that narrow opening, the grounds, flooded with light of the setting sun, could be seen. There was the stone paving that continued past the gate and the tips of tree branches that remained of the garden trees, and beyond that a dark stone wall.

Megumi had bit by bit climbed the hill. Her heart beat just a little faster. While peering through the doors of the gate, she quietly eased closer. The gap open to the outside world was tantalizingly narrow. The door on the first story window on the stone wall was opened, and white curtains could be seen, but just barely. Within the house there were lights on. From the inner walls to the furniture, whatever it was, it could be seen by looking into the house, that much was clear.

Without realizing it, Megumi's breath caught. As she had approached the front of the gate, the gate doors moved as if swaying, perhaps blown by the evening breeze. One of the doors moved inward, swaying open. Picking up momentum, the gate slid open without a single sound, along the arched rail on

the stone placement.

Megumi held her breath, and as if being lured in by it opening, neared that gate.

Chapter 5 Translation Notes

Reader Question: Obaa-chan/Ojii-chan and variants of that get used an awful lot in this story. I'd been trying to translate them as Granny/Grandpa/Old Woman/Old Man and the like but there are times I'm not sure if my translation choice quite fits all the variations. Sometimes making it fit the character speaking is a stretch, too; Ozaki sometimes refers to people as just obaa-chan or something which works in Japanese but having him call them Granny seems off. Old man/old lady seems more his style, but I hesitate to translate the more polite Ritsuko calling them that even if she uses obaa-chan. I take issue with forcing my impression of the character voice over the text under any circumstances, including times like this when I think it's more a cultural nuance. English speakers don't tend to call people Granny/Grampy unless they're family or like family--while Sotoba is like one big family at times, Obaa-san/Ojii-san are standard in Japanese. I tried [slipping an Obaa-san](#) into one of the chapters here to see how it suits readers, but haven't gone back to revert all formerly translated bits into Japanese, and I can easily revert that one based on the final decision. **Do readers have a preference between that being translated out or kept in Japanese?**

Suzuki no obaa-chan; it's either going to be "The Suzuki Obaa-chan" or "The Suzuki's Obaa-chan" if kept in Japanese or, in English, "the Suzuki Granny" or "the Suzuki's Granny" and Suzuki Obaa-chan will either be Granny Suzuki in English or just left as Suzuki Obaa-chan.

I will eventually put them all to one or the other, unless of course it's a familial reference. If someone is referring to their own or someone else's grandfather, then regardless of which direction I go with names, I will be keeping those with the English term, such as when the monks are talking about the family of four that died in Mizobe--The man, the wife, the son, the grandpa, *etc.* If someone talks about becoming an obaa-san or an ojii-san, then I'll still just keep it as talk

about becoming an old man, *etc.* **This is only a question of what to do with it as an extension of or as a replacement for a name.**

Chapter 5-1

A two-stone handicap allowance - Ichimoku no nimoku mo oku - In the board game of go there are handicaps that can be given to weaker players in the form of stones placed at the opening of the game before the more skilled opponent. In the story context, it means the temple had a lot of leverage over the people and had to be respected as such.

Chapter 5-3

Child of Shame - Hajikakikko - A child born late to parents (say, in their late 30s or 40s), which is shameful because it's proof they're having sex at that age.

Chapter 6

Part 1

When the phone rang at Kaori's house, it was a little after dinner, just past the beginning of a nine o'clock TV program.

Her mother who had picked up the phone spoke with the person on the other end, then called to Kaori who had been watching TV in the living room with a stern voice.

"Kaori, did you see Megumi-chan today?"

Kaori nodded. "When I was talking Love, I saw her."

"She says Megumi-chan hasn't come home yet. Did you hear anything."

Kaori blinked. "Not really..."

"So much for that. I wonder if she could have went to Mizobe?"

Megumi was dressed up, but that was normal for her, so she didn't know if she planned to go out or not. No, she didn't seem like she was leaving the village. After she talked to Kaori, she went up the hill after all...

Kaori took in the atmosphere. "We were in Monzen when we met, but..."

And then she went up the hill. Kaori hesitated to add that. Kaori was the only one to know that that hill was Megumi's secret. If you went down the slope partway up the hill into the village, you would come out to a house in Naka-Sotoba whose back yard was a mountain range. Since the year had started, Megumi had incessantly visited one certain house in Naka-Sotoba. In order to quietly watch over a single window from the back yard.

Kaori swallowed her words. There was no way she could tell that to her mother. ---To anyone.

'I see', was all her mother said, turning back towards the receiver. Her little brother who was watching TV turned towards Kaori.

"What? Now Megumi's missing?"

Her little brother Akira was just a first year middle schooler and yet he spoke of not just Kaori but Megumi without any honorific.

"Don't say stupid things. I'm sure she's just late."

"Even at this hour?"

At Akira's words, she turned her eyes to the living room clock. 9:17.

Even if she was going to look in on Natsuno Yuuki's house as always, it was late. When she had met Megumi it was just past five, and she couldn't imagine her spending four hours from then, without even having dinner, in the bushes being bit up by mosquitoes looking up into that window.

"Don'tcha think something happened?"

The implications in Akira's tone made her raise her head, with rising uneasiness. The tragedy in Yamairi where the dead bodies were found was just a few days ago. While she had heard that it was nothing more than the elderly in bad condition who died---

Kaori's voice called out.

"Mom, ... Megumi-chan was climbing the hill that goes up under Kanemasa."

Her mother fleetingly turned her gaze to her, nodded, and conveyed as much over the phone.

Part 2

The phone rang, and Ohkawa interrupted his conversation with the bunch drinking sake at the counter to pick it up. The caller was the fire brigade's chief, Yasumori Tokujirou.

"Ah---Ohkawa-san. Do you know Shimizu-san from Shimo-Sotoba's daughter?"

Yeah, Ohkawa nodded. There wasn't any special connection between himself and Shimizu but the daughter was about the same age as Ohkawa's second son,

so he wasn't completely unfamiliar.

"Well, it seems the girl hasn't returned home yet, you see."

"Heh?" Ohkawa raised a brow and looked up at the shop clock. It was going on nine thirty. It was well past the hours on their sign board but the heavy drinkers had stayed at the shop, and he'd still failed to close up shop. "That's strange. Even this late."

"Mm. It is. It seems she went up into the western mountains. With everything going on recently, with all the dangerous, her parents are worried. I thought I might search the mountains, but."

Ohkawa grimaced. Ohkawa was a member of the fire brigade, but he was the squad leader for the community of Sotoba. Having to go flush out a girl from Kami-Sotoba wasn't something he was exactly thankful for the chance to do. And thanks to the heavy drinkers he'd yet to eat anything that evening, making it all the less appealing.

"Anyway, I wonder if she didn't just go to hang out. Like, she's on a date and lost track of time. I mean, I'm not saying I don't wanna do it or anything but, that kid can be a careless one like that sometimes, I just think."

"Boss Matsuo said that too," said Tokujirou with an audibly bitter smile. Matsuo Seiji was the quad leader for Shimo-Sotoba. "Well, think of how her parents feel and do it as a favor to me. Incidentally, could I have you bring by three cases of beer to the station, I wonder. It'll be my treat."

Ohkawa grinned. That was a very Tokujirou-like way to mind him.

"Understood. --Then, at the station."

As he hanged up the phone, the customers at the counter looked upon Ohkawa with great interested. "Did someone go missing? Who?"

Bracing herself as she asked was Itou Ikumi. She could be called a regular but, she only drank on other customer's generosity and never paid in her own cash.

"The Shimizu-san's house's daughter. Girl called Megumi."

Oh my, cried Ikumi in what could have been heard as a cheer. Ohkawa snorted through his nose, turning towards the second floor and calling up. "Oi,

Atsushi! C'mere a sec!"

Taking enough time to be frustrating, his son leisurely came down.

"Don't drag your ass. We're doin' a mountain hunt."

"I've got to go too?"

Don't fuss and whine, Ohkawa shouted. Compared to his second son and his daughter, he was an embarrassment of a son but there was no denying he was his oldest boy. Some day he'd inherit the shop, and he'd probably inherit his job at the fire brigade too. Thinking as much, Ohkawa was sure to have his son accompany him when workers were needed.

What's wrong, said his daughter Yuzue poking her face out from the living room. When he said that Megumi was gone, she made a complicated expression. His second son Yutaka popped his face out, looking worried.

"Should I go too?"

There's no need, Ohkawa had started to say when he thought twice. If they were going to be combing the mountains, then the more people the better, probably. "That's right. Get ready. Put on long sleeves and gloves. We'll be going into the mountains after all."

Mm, said Yutaka hurrying up to the second floor. Ohkawa shouted at Atsushi who stood there sulkily.

"You're coming too, so hurry and get ready! And three cases of beer. We're delivering 'em to the station!"

Part 3

Hasegawa flipped the switch, the electric lamp light fading out. Closing time already, said Yuuki as he dug in his pocket for his wallet. He must have seen him doing that, as Hirosawa assured him: "At your leisure," as he changed the CR to Rhythm and Blues, poured a glass of whisky and water and taking a seat at the counter. "Now the night begins. For me, at least."

Seeing Hasegawa with his glass in hand, his wife Chiyomi laughed.

"I'm going back early. Hirosawa-san, please don't let him get ahead of himself, all right?" Chiyomi said to Hirosawa, giving a smile to Yuuki and the others as she took off her apron. She hanged it back up in the small closet by the kitchen, waving her hand and leaving the shop. Hasegawa's home was on the other side of the shore in Mizuguchi.

Left in the shop were Hirosawa and Yuuki, and Tashiro Bookstore's Tashiro Masaki. Since coming here to

creole

after Gotouda Shuuji's service, he'd found himself walking in often, and through that came to know quite a few faces. The regular customers that made

creole

their stronghold had between them their own community tone. Yuuki found that to be indubitably cozy.

How much time had lapsed since Hasegawa had settled at the counter, when Chiyomi returned?

"What's wrong? Forget something?"

At Hasegawa's voice, Chiyomi shook her head. "Is there anyone who might have seen Shimizu-san's daughter Megumi-chan?"

Hasegawa said no, looking at Yuuki and the others. Tashiro and Hirosawa shook their heads. Yuuki didn't know who Shimizu Megumi was to start with. Yuuki looked at Chiyomi.

"Shimizu---do you mean, the Shimizu-san who comes here? From JA."

"Yes. Megumi-chan is Shimizu-san's daughter. She's in tenth grade. ---Ah, I wonder if she might be a classmate of Yuuki-san's household's son?"

She is, Hirosawa nodded. "They go to the same high school. That would make them classmates, wouldn't it? ---And, what has happened to that Megumi-chan? You don't mean...?"

Chiyomi nodded. "They say she hasn't come home. Shimizu-san and his wife

are at the police box, people are gathering."

"Searching the mountains?" Tashiro asked gravely.

"It looks like it. After all, look at the hour. There was a person who'd last seen her going up the western mountain, so they're saying she may have been stranded up there."

Yuuki looked towards Hirosawa and the others. "Is it that dangerous, being up in the mountains around here?"

"No--it is not the mountains themselves which are dangerous. However it would be difficult if you lost your way in the mountains north of Yamairi.

Or perhaps in the back yard of the Shrine. It would be dangerous to fall into the Hell Hole, but..."

"Hell Hole?"

Hirosawa pointed to the east. "Across the river, there is the Shrine, correct? If one were to scale the cliff behind it, there's a cave called the Hell Hole."

"Heh..."

"I'm not certain whether to call it a cliff or a crag but, in a gap there is a narrow fissure. I wonder how deep it goes? There's a hokora erected at the entrance, so I don't know if one could enter it but it has many branch roads, and it seems to be quite long. It looks like it goes down to the base of the earth itself, which is likely why it was named the Hell Hole."

"She couldn't get in there, yes?"

"Yes. But, there's what's above that hole. The Hell Hole crosses from behind the shrine diagonally along the eastern mountain but, in more shallow places there are times when it caves in and the hole opens. That area is the shrine forest, so nobody entered the area to cut trees. From the start, people never went in there, so if the hole opened, it wouldn't be known."

"But that's unrelated. The last she was seen, she was climbing the western mountains--the Kanemasa hill, they said."

"Then, it shouldn't be that she got lost, at least. A forest path runs along the western mountain ranges, and as long as you don't go off the path you won't go

over the ridges, you'd still be in the village." Tashiro said, as Hasegawa tilted his head.

"Couldn't she have mistakenly gone off of the forest path and ended up crossing over the ridge?"

Hirosawa shook his head. "The forest path follows the steel towers and the high voltage wires. Even if she had lost her sense of direction, she would know quickly if she had stepped off the mountain path. She is a villager, so I don't think that she would make such a mistake. She may be injured or stranded someplace. Lately, there has been talk of wild dogs coming out too, yes?"

"Takami-san and the others had said that. So they're calling together members of the fire brigade, they say."

"Well, Shimizu-san must feel like his heart's in his mouth," said Hasegawa rising to a stand. "This is no time for drinking. Let's head out and help."

"I too will be going," said Hirosawa as Yuuki and Tashiro rose. He was familiar with Shimizu. And moreover, hearing that it was his son's classmate, he couldn't take it as somebody else's problem.

Part 4

When Toshio came back from a house call, he saw a familiar car stopped on the lot. Putting his examination bag down in the waiting room, he returned to his house to see, as expected, his wife Kyouko had returned home.

"What, you're back?"

At Toshio's voice, Kyouko who was sitting in the western style living room waved her hand flippantly.

"From tomorrow on is Obon, isn't it? I was told to come back."

Toshio blinked. "....By my mother?"

"By who else? Come back on the thirteenth, we've made plans, so don't think you can just come on the day of, she shrieked at me. ---By the way, what plans

did you have for Obon?"

"You ask like you expect me to know? It's probably that you haven't been by lately, so she just wanted to see your face."

"Well isn't that just an honor," Kyouko sighed. "But, I'm not happy with this at all."

Me neither, Toshio answered in his thoughts.

"And somehow, I get the feeling her good humor was worse than usual."

"It's bad. Ever since Kanemasa moved in."

Oh really, Kyouko leaned her body forward. "They finally came in?"

"Aa. Just the day before yesterday. My mother was probably wanting them just stay away without moving in. Since then, she's been fault finding all over the place."

Oh no, said Kyouko throwing herself onto the couch and arching her white neck. She grumbled with a sigh to the ceiling. "I'm starting to want to go back to Mizobe."

"So go back."

"If I do that, she'll attack me on the phone."

Probably, Toshio mumbled. That Takae did not find Kyouko agreeable was something he knew, from hearing her say as much more than often enough. So, while it should have been fine to leave her as she was out in Mizobe, it seemed she didn't find that agreeable either. When Toshio had said, half in jest, that she could go back to her own family, why, how it would dishonor our family! Takae said, her face warping. She would certainly never allow something as indecent as a to be like a divorce, so she had said. So in the end, nothing was agreeable to her.

As the married couple let out a sigh, Takae herself entered the western style living room. She seemed fresh from the bath, in her nightwear.

"Oh, welcome back."

Yeah, Toshio said, averting his gaze. She prodded Kyouko, whose legs were

exposed in her slovenly casual mini-skirt, in the elbow. Kyouko gave an aggravated sigh and corrected her seating posture.

"I have taken my bath first."

Sure, Toshio gave as a half-hearted response. With a composed expression, Takae took up post on one section of the couch. Just as he was thinking of escaping, the doorbell rang and he was saved.

"Now who might that be, at this hour?" Suppressing Takae whose brows had furrowed as she spoke, Toshio stood up.

"It's fine, I'll get it. It might be an emergency for me." So he said, swiftly making a brisk escape to the entryway.

In the entryway stood resident officer Takami with a grave expression. As soon as he saw Toshio's face he asked whether he'd seen Shimizu Megumi. Toshio tilted his head. Megumi was a girl who could be said to cause quite a fuss for him as a doctor but, maybe because it was summer vacation, she hadn't shown her face here for a while.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me something happened to Megumi-chan?"

"We haven't seen her. She set out at noon, and it seems she hasn't returned yet."

Toshio cast his eyes down to his wristwatch. Half past ten.

"....This late? No contact?"

"It seems not. In the evening she was seen climbing the slope to Kanemasa by somebody, but that's it."

"That's worrisome, isn't it."

Maybe this happened all the time in the city but in the village there weren't any girls out for a stroll at this hour. Even if she were hanging out in the neighborhood, she wouldn't have missed dinner and also given no phone call or contact.

"I hope nothing's happened. Was the fire brigade contacted?"

"I did. Lately wild dogs have been about, and with as many strange things as

have been happening, Shimizu-san is becoming very pale. They're talking about searching the mountains for her a little bit."

"I'll go too," Toshio said, a voice from behind sounding out as he stepped out of the entryway.

"You must be joking!"

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Takae, who had put on a summer haori, giving Takami a stern eye.

"There is no reason for you to do such a thing. --And you, Takami-san, what were you thinking?"

Takami stiffened his spine like a child be chastised for a prank.

"Toshio is the medical director of the Ozaki Clinic. He simply cannot vacate the premises so freely. In the first place, we never know when an emergency may arise. Everyone's lives are entrusted to him."

"Yes....., thank you." Takami bowed deeply.

"Setting aside that you have come to Toshio for direction, what is this talk of having him assist with searching the mountains! It is very troubling if you make use of the Ozakis at your convenience!"

"No, ma'am, that was not my intention. I was only asking a question. Then, please excuse me for the night." Takami bowed his neck, hurriedly lowering his head. He raised his face, seeing Toshio's bitter smile. With his body turned so that Takae wouldn't see from behind him, he raised his hand in an apologetic gesture. Takami understood, showing Toshio a faint smile.

"My, how rude of me. ---Then, if you'll excuse me."

Lowering his head to Takae once more, Takami quickly left the Ozaki household.

Part 5

As foretold by the Oracle, he was driven from the hill, wandering the wasteland.

The Shiki at his side was, at least as far as he was concerned, nothing more than an extension of that curse. His little brother's corpse was the most forthright symbol of his sin. He was to, with him at his side, wander over the barren, frozen soil.

In the dense night ruled over by the evil spirits, he merely kept his head down, walking on resolutely while accompanied by the wil;-o'-the-wisps. Aware of his little brother who had become a Shiki at his side, cowed into silence he traversed the frozen earth beneath his feet.

At last, as the vigorous jeers of the evil spirits surrounding at a distance died out, the great earth was tinged in white light. The fine grains of the cold ground glittered in the light of dawn, its textures exposed, and, suspecting the presence beside him that had at last begun to dim had faded, he raised his face.

He was alone in the great rift between heaven and earth.

There was neither a trace of the evil spirits that trailed him, nor of his little brother.

As far as he could see upon of the cold ground and the dull skies, the undulations of obstinate deep red stretched on to the horizon, above which hung low clouds like sheep that had seeped in muddy waters. The dawn dyed red the melancholy clouds and those highs and lows in a catastrophic cross-hatch.

There were the dips and valleys of the inorganic earth, the life like, coordinated writhing of the clouds, and interposed betwixt the two left in the gap was none other than him and he alone. If he turned to look behind him, in the distance he could see the green hill passed over by the night. Pushed aside by the winds, the swirl of the clouds was cut off in the skies above that hill, a small, round beam of light pouring straight down upon it.

It was due to that light that, far away as he was, the greenery of that hill and the circular wall enclosing its base, as well as the white town erected on its summit were clear to view. It floated within the somber world, literally shimmering. A green so greed as to be radiant, stones so pure white they stung the eyes, with a splendor as if in direct contact with that sky above.

That was the hometown he was driven out of, unable to make restitution, the

land where his brother who had become a Shiki slept, which lead to him being driven out into the wilderness, only able to stand, as if he existed only to cast shadows upon the earth, longing for it.

The clouds, the earth, the light, the hill. They awoke a memory within him of when he received the temple's verdict.

Why, the elder asked.

The hall contained in grey stone, closely, closely

"Junior Monk."

Called out to, Seishin turned to look. Looking fresh from the bath with a towel over his head, Ikebe peered into the temple office window.

"Pardon me. Do you have a moment?"

Ikebe said apologetically. Seishin set his pencil down. "What is it?"

"Junior Monk, I suppose you haven't seen Megumi-chan from the Shimizu-san's place, have you?"

"No." Seishin tilted his head. The Shimizus were a parish family but he had mostly never met with their daughter Megumi, and he couldn't remember when he'd last seen her face or when that was. "I haven't seen her in a long while. ---What's happened?"

"Well, it seems she hasn't come home yet. Resident officer Takami-san is here, but."

Seishin stood and stepped out of the office. As he rounded the corner in the hallway, Takami stood in the dirt floor entryway with a flashlight in one hand, Miwako kneeling upon the rising step into the home with a look of concern on her face.

"Good evening. What's happened to Megumi-chan?"

"Ah---Excuse the intrusion, Junior Monk. I hope you weren't in the middle of work?"

"Don't mind it. Megumi-chan hasn't come home?"

That's right, said Takami who explained the situation. While doing so he wiped the sweat dampening the back of his neck. He must have been bitten by

mosquitoes, the sun burnt nape of his neck peppered in red.

"I mean lately, you know, a lot of things have happened. So everyone would be worried, right?"

"What happened in Yamairi?" Seishin started to say, but Takami waved his hand.

"What, no, not the talks about a degenerate or anything like that. Though there may be people who are thinking along those lines. But, while those rumors are also making people uneasy, there are the ones about the wild dogs. Lately, there's a lot of talk of people seeing wild dogs in the mountains lately."

Aa, Seishin murmured. "That is so, certainly."

"I figured, the Junior Monk has not seen Megumi-chan, then?"

Yes, Seishin nodded.

Miwako's brows knitted together as she touched her hand to her cheek.

"I wonder if it might not be best to go and help?"

"That's right. ---I'll head out for a bit."

As Seishin turned back, Takami hastily called out. "No, that's! I didn't come to have the Junior Monk join in. It's just that she might be stranded someplace, so I had just come to see if there was any sign of her."

Takami was unexpectedly flustered.

"But,"

"No, really. If I have the Junior Monk help, I'll be scolded by the elderly," Takami said with a forced smile. "To tell the truth, just a while ago, the Madame of the Ozaki's just finished scolding me. For carelessly going to consult with the doctor."

I see, Seishin smiled bitterly.

"So, please do not mind and leave it be."

"Then, I'll go," Ikebe said.

"No, Ikebe-kun, but..."

At Takami's attempt to keep him from joining, he smiled. "A parishioner is in peril! Isn't it better if there are more people helping?"

"That's right," Miwako smiled. "Ikebe-kun, might you do this for us? You'd just finished with your bath, too, I really am sorry."

"Not at all. She's a young lady after all, Shimizu-san must not have a heart to go on. Either way I was just going to go on to sleep anyway. Junior Monk, please keep on working."

"I'm sorry."

Don't be, Ikebe said cheerfully. "Just let me change my clothes right quick, Takami-san, please wait just a moment."

"Man, I'm really sorry," Takami scratched his head as he saw Ikebe hurry into the depths of the temple living quarters. "It'd be good if she just went to a friend's house and lost track of time."

"It would," Miwako said with a sigh. "But, it has become this late. Shimizu-san must indeed be so worried."

"That's right. No call, and even with it this late, she hasn't come back."

Miwako slightly inclined her head. "Have you tried Kanemasa?"

Ha? Takami blinked. Unable to follow his mother's line of thinking, Seishin also looked to her face.

"Oh dear, I wonder if I've said something so off?" Miwako, bewildered, pinched her mouth tightly. "I had heard that a family had moved into Kanemasa. Perhaps by chance, they had a child of the same age. Megumi-chan had gone up the hill, hadn't she? I wonder if she hadn't met with somebody from Kanemasa and became caught up in a conversation in which she lost track of time, perhaps?"

"Aa---that could be."

"But, Mother. If that were the case, Megumi-chan would have had the opportunity to call, wouldn't she? Kanemasa's family likely would have pressed her to call as well."

"My, but the idea of calling never even entered their minds precisely because they lost track of time, is what I am saying. In the village of course one would call but the rumors say that that family is from the city, so perhaps the idea that it would be best to call home or such does not cross their minds, don't you think?"

"But, even so...."

"That's true. Even so, not making contact over dinner, is certainly strange," Miwako said, smiling with a blush. "My apologies. I was just thinking that she had gone up the hill, and from there it had just come to mind. Please forget about it."

No, no, Takami said while smiling when suddenly he seemed struck by something.

"It might still be the case, even if unexpectedly. ---But." Takami tilted his head. "I have heard rumors that it seemed they had moved in but, as for what kind of people they are..."

"My, aren't there people who have at least seen them?"

"About that," Takami said, his voice lowering. "There isn't anybody. It seems they don't come out of the house at all."

"Is that so?" Miwako said, her eyes wide in surprise.

"There's talk that that a young guy from there's been sighted, but nothing on the essential family themselves. To say the least, they don't seem to have any plans to interact with their neighbors. With them acting like that, anything that would lead to Megumi-chan meeting with them is hard to think up...."

Seishin nodded in his mind. The Kirishikis had moved in the day before yesterday. Meeting Tatsumi was something that happened yesterday. He hadn't heard any rumors about the master of the house but that the essential man of the family had yet to show himself before the village.

Because they had only been moved in for two days, they were probably still finishing cleaning up from the move. Maybe they just didn't feel up to walking around the village but, him not showing himself at all was somewhat of a surprising circumstance. Did they not have any interest in what type of village

they had just moved into? Did he not want to take a walk about to survey the surroundings of his house like Tatsumi or----.

Seishin tilted his head, when Ikebe returned in jeans and a long sleeved shirt with a flashlight in hand.

"Sorry, thanks for waiting!"

Part 6

Specks of light dotted the western mountain. Voices mingled calling out 'Ooi!'

"Man, she's not along any of the roadways," said Tashiro as Yuuki wiped his sweat. The mountain nights were cool but as expected when climbing up and down the slope, it got hot.

There were limits to searching with a hand light within the village. Following the forest paths, pushing through the surroundings and coming back lead to many repeats but there was an uneasiness that they hadn't searched enough.

'Ooi,' came a voice from very nearby on the mountain, and for a moment, Yuuki anticipated good news but the voice that replied back was tinged with disappointment.

"This's, it's not gonna work out unless we give a full blown mountain hunt. Let's regroup around the Maruyasu lumberyard."

Hirosawa sighed and climbed back onto the forest path, Yuuki following suit. It was only one block of mountains surrounding a small village, and yet trying to find a single person amongst that made one realize, the mountains really were broad.

Fatigued as they were, while hobbling down the forest path, Tashiro and the young man walking with him came to a stop. It was a monk from the temple. He was called Ikebe, if he recalled. He was just approaching the Kanemasa house.

"What's the matter, Ikebe-kun?" Hirosawa asked, Ikebe turning to face him with a complicated expression.

"I wonder if anyone in this house has seen Megumi-chan. Wouldn't it be better to ask them?"

Hirosawa blinked. "At this hour?"

"Yeah," Ikebe smiled, embarrassed. "The Madame at the temple was talking about it to Takami-san. Maybe there's a chance she met the people from this house, and couldn't she have forgot the time, like."

"But,"

"And we can't just say 'at this hour' can we, since Megumi-chan was seen climbing the hill? In that case, they may have seen her."

That is true, said Hirosawa making a complicated expression himself as he looked up at the dark house. Yuuki understood Hirosawa's bewilderment. Since they'd moved in, the inhabitants hadn't shown themselves. It looked like those who lived there had no intend to proactively mingle with the villagers. With high fencing that couldn't be peered through, together with such a closed off house, it was thought that the new inhabitants wanted to draw a line between themselves and the villagers. Calling on such people at this hour to ask about a little girl's whereabouts, however proper, was cause for indecision.

"Shall we try?" The one to say this was Hasegawa. "You're absolutely right. They may have seen her, at least. If that's the case, they may know which direction she had gone, or something along those lines. If Megumi-chan is injured and stranded, what's important is finding her every bit sooner as possible."

That's true, Hirosawa nodded. Yuuki and the others approached the tightly closed gates. On the side of one gatepost pillar was a side door, and on the side of that an intercom was visible. ---Yes, even if they were intruding and waking somebody, all that they needed do was speak over the intercom, so doing this much, in case of an emergency, was bound to be forgivable.

As their representative, Hirosawa placed his finger on the button. While looking over the faces about him, he timidly pressed the call chime. Twice, three times, and the fourth time there was an answer.

"Yes."

"Uhm---I'm sorry for disturbing you late at night. There's something we'd like to ask, but," Hirosawa conveyed briefly that a high school girl had gone missing and that they were wondering whether they had seen her.

"One moment please."

The voice on the other end of the intercom sounded young. A number of people in the village had said they'd caught sight of a young man in about his mid twenties, so it was said so, it must have been him, Hirosawa thought.

After a bit, the side door opened, Hirosawa faltered. The one who appeared with a flashlight in hand was the man of the rumors.

"Thank you for waiting."

"I am sorry again. At this hour."

"No, no. ---It's just, I'd asked every member of the house but, it seems nobody has seen the young lady."

Is that right, Hirosawa sighed.

"That she had climbed up this way is certain?"

"Yes. The last time she was seen, it was when she was climbing this hill, it seems."

Is that right, he said stepping outside and closing the door, smiling at the blinking Hirosawa. "I was told by the master to help. They must be worried, he said."

"No--that's," Hirosawa said, dismayed. "To have you do that much for us would be,"

"No. This is the sort of thing we must ban together for. Ah, I am called Tatsumi!"

"I am Hirosawa. I'm sorry for the trouble. Thank you very much."

Tatsumi smiled. "But I may only get in the way. I'm not very familiar with the lay of the land around here, so please instruct me in what to do."

The group split up to split their coverage of the mountains. Yuuki had merely been following Hirosawa and the others. At some point he ended up in a line with Tatsumi and Ikebe, because it was clear they were the only ones unfamiliar with the mountains.

"Ah, is that the way to the temple?" Tatsumi said to Ikebe, shining his light on the surroundings. "The other day, I had met the fellow named Muroi-san. He was just coming out of the Ozaki clinic."

"The Junior Monk? Heh?"

"You did not hear about it?"

"Yeah. The Junior Monk is the type of person who wouldn't gossip about things like that at all.

Tatsumi smiled. "He was indeed a mild man."

"That's right. If it was me, I'd spread it all over right away though. At the end of the day, I'm a Hachigoro at heart."

"Is there any News Value to spread with that?"

"Oh, definitely. Everyone in the village is extremely interested, you should know! I mean, your fine house is rather strange, and since moving all the way out here they haven't stepped out even once, have they? So with that, what kind of people are they, and the like, is everywhere."

"It isn't that we don't come out at all, but. I see, that's what it's come to, huh?"

"To put it bluntly, it's thought that you're avoiding the villagers. I mean, I was completely surprised when Tatsumi-san stepped out like this!"

"Avoiding? Why is that?"

"Yeah, well, since moving in, you haven't come out at all. There's that tall fence, and the gate's always shut up real tight."

"Really?" Tatsumi blinked, as he murmured. "Maybe in that case, it was not good to move in without giving greetings anywhere. We hadn't been into the habit of socializing with our neighbors much, so it really just never crossed anyone's minds."

"Oh. Well, then." At Ikebe's response, Yuuki laughed.

"That's how it goes when you live in the city. Unless there's a notice going around the neighborhood, you don't usually even know your neighbor's faces, and if you live in an apartment you don't even have that much. You leave the gates closed and even during the day time you lock your doors. Out here though, even in the middle of the night, everything is left open and unlocked. In the beginning even I was a little reluctant to get used to it, myself."

"Yuuki-san also moved in from the city?"

"That's right. That's why, even if I knew from the start that that's how it was, I was reluctant. Somehow, I just couldn't stay calm about it, so I would end up locking up the front entryway. Though to start with our house never even had a lock on the back door."

"Heh?"

"It was like---like I'd left the gas oven on somewhere, it felt like. It took about half a year for me to get used to it."

"So that's how it is, huh?" Tatsumi nodded. "I'll have to report that when I go back. I don't think anyone's thought about that at all."

"Though I don't think it's anything you have to force on yourselves. But, isn't it boring? Bored up in the house all the time like that."

Yuuki nodded, too. "You've finally moved all the way out here after all. You can leave the house without locking the doors, know everybody in the neighborhood, easily come and go helping each other out. ---That is the greatest thing of all about small societies like this."

"Isn't it just?" Tatsumi nodded with a smile, and Yuuki devoted himself to the search. It made him uneasy to get too caught up in small talk, and in doing so some distance had been put between themselves and Hirosawa and the others who had started on ahead. While hurrying his feet, he thought to himself that even with such a difficult move in, the family wasn't really all that strange.

---All it is is what it is, as was so often the case.

Maybe because they had closed their mouths and were hurrying ahead, they were able to overhear another nearby search group's conversation.

"Man, this is really eating up all kinds of time."

"It'll be great if we find her, but. I don't think I could deal with finding her already en route to Buddhahood."

Without thinking, Yuuki looked towards the forest. Through the spans of dark underbrush and thicket, the flashlights couldn't be seen. It seemed there were two or three but he couldn't tell which people precisely they were.

"Sure hope we don't. Anyway, ain't she probably just out fooling around somewhere? Come tomorrow, she'll just come back with a bland look on her face."

"She just might. It is the Shimizu girl, ain't it? That girl likes to show herself off. Makes you wonder if she's not getting it on shacked up with some guy."

"If she's just shacking it up that'd be for the best, though. I mean, they're saying just recently the old people up in Yamairi were killed off, weren't they? I just hope that freak's not still hanging around somewhere."

"Those were natural deaths, weren't they?"

"I've got to wonder about that. Just before that there was that thing--the little boy from the Maeda household, wasn't it? There was a hit and run on him, wasn't there? Things ain't as peaceful as they used to be, even in this village."

"I don't wanna say this too loud but, I personally think we might just get this over with faster if instead of searching the mountains we arrested Ohkawa's boy and asked him where she is."

"More like Kanemasa. After all there is a young guy with them, isn't there? Couldn't he have dragged her into the bushes out here?"

Yuuki came to an immediate halt, turning towards Tatsumi. Tatsumi pointed to himself with his index finger, a comically dumbfounded look on his face.

"Yeah, yeah! There's talk that the car that did a hit and run on the Maedas was the Kanemasa's car, you know!"

"Now hey, you, didn't the Junior Monk from the temple have a talk with

them?"

"No matter what else is going on, I don't think that one's true."

"I gotta wonder. In the first place all the folks in the village are always treat the temple a little too special. Even with the Shimizu's daughter, we can't be too sure. I mean, that Junior's past thirty already and still single, you know."

"The temple has another one on the younger side, too. Couldn't it have been him?"

Yuuki was somehow too ashamed to keep walking. He waited for the voices to move far on ahead. Tatsumi and Ikebe stopped, as if waiting for Yuuki. The sounds of others pushing their way through the underbrush grew distant, until Yuuki let out a secret sigh of relief.

"...Please don't think we're all like that."

"It's nothing for Yuuki-san to make such a face about. An outsider is just that," Tatsumi said with a forced smile. "All the more for staying so strangely indoors. It really would have been for the best had we gone around giving greetings."

"Even if you went around introducing yourselves, you would still be seen around as outsiders...." Ikebe breathed a sigh. "To start with, the villagers are basically family, after all."

"That is how it goes." Speaking with an intentionally flippant tone to the two, he bowed his head. The tendency of the village to exclude foreign substances as a matter of course was something Yuuki was all too personally familiar with.

Ikebe laughed. "Once we find Megumi-chan, her parents will be put at ease, and we'll have proof to clear our names. --Let us go!"

The angry voices shouting out 'Oo!' went on into the night past three in the morning. Hearing 'I found her!' Yuuki and the others pushing their way through the thicket looked up. As they looked around for the source of the voice, Hirosawa and the others came hurrying back from a nearby slope.

"It was from that way!"

Yuuki and the others headed in the direction indicated. Yuuki himself had completely lost his sense of where he was but according to Hirosawa, Yuuki and

the others were apparently fairly far north of the western mountains.

"Far ahead of here is a narrow mountain stream, and across that is the northern mountain. The one with the temple."

So they were right where the northern and western mountains crossed. Going down the slope, it seemed to come out to a cove like area where the Maruyasu lumberyard isolated the terraced fields.

The lights from within the village mingled, along with the voices of the people. From here and there and there and here the sounds of the underbrush giving way was heard, people coming to gather round. Hurrying along after Hirosawa and Tashiro at the front, at last the place where the lights gathered together could be seen. There was a difference in level about one person's height tall, and beneath that in a hollowed out place the people gathered.

"Did you find her?"

As Hirosawa came running, a man wearing a fire brigade happi coat turned to face him. "She's here. ---Right here."

"Is she hurt?" Hirosawa asked, the man cocking his head.

"At least it doesn't look like she is."

Yuuki who had come running was also able to see the girl being helped up by so many people. She didn't look to be injured, but she was entirely limp.

"Hey, you're Megumi-chan, ain'tcha? You okay?" A middle aged man who helped her up gave the girl a shake. Someone's voice called out: "It'd be better not to shake her too much!"

"Wouldn't it be best to call the Ozaki Doctor? She might've hit her head."

"Ah... That's true."

Just as the middle aged man spoke, Megumi's eyes opened. The lights gathered around were brilliantly bright, so she raised her hand to cover her eyes.

"You're conscious? Are you okay?"

To the surrounding questions, Megumi nodded. She seemed out of it

somehow but she didn't look to have any injuries.

"How do you feel? Can you stand?"

When spoken to, she gave a somehow mindless, slow-witted not. Gripping the hands offered from right and left, somehow, she was able to stand.

"Thank God," came a relieved voice. With the men's support, Megumi staggeringly started down the slope.

"If she can walk by herself, I guess there's nothing to worry about," Hasegawa said, Yuuki letting out a deep sigh. If noting else, it was good she was safe.

"She must've fallen off the ledge, huh? Just glad we found her, honestly." Tashiro gave a broad smile and Yuuki nodded. Boisterously relieved sighs and smiling voices flowed back into the village, people coming down from the mountains in groups of twos and threes.

When Ikebe returned to the temple, it was after four, and the light from the office next to the temple living quarters was still on. He quietly opened the entryway door, standing on the dirty floor as he tried to brush off the mud and scraps of grass clinging to his jeans when, perhaps having heard him, Seishin came.

"Welcome home. I am sorry for having put you through the trouble."

Spoken to by the assistant head priest, the younger Ikebe bowed his head. Ikebe couldn't hate that nature of Seishin's. While he was ever mindful of having reserved manners no matter how long he had known someone, which could make him thought of as constrained, it was much better than him treating people overbearingly.

"How did it go?" Seishin asked, worried. The assistant head priest stayed up late often enough but today he may have been up waiting on Ikebe.

"We found her."

"Ah, that's good. In the mountains after all?"

"Yes. Just at the ledge in the back yard of Maruyasu. It appears she fell on the slope or something along those lines; she was unconscious when we found her."

"Is she all right?"

"It seems so," Ikebe said, sitting on the ledge of the entryway. He spoke while taking off his leather boots. "When she was called, her eyes opened. She seemed kind of lifeless, but as far as injuries, it looks like she didn't have any, and with a little support she was able to walk down the mountain."

"Ah... that's good."

Thinking whether 'good' could be said or not made Ikebe remember Megumi's state. Megumi seemed absent minded. With a gaze seemingly unfixed, her gait while walking, even supported, was unnatural. The state of having had a terrifying experience, like heart hadn't sobered to the experience was what it looked like.

"I wonder if something happened?" While listening to Seishin's question asked with a voice from the bottom of his heart, Ikebe thought of complicated matters, getting the mud off of his shoes.

"That's something we can't be sure of, as Megumi-chan herself didn't say a thing. Even if you spoke to her, she seemed inattentive, or like she was spaced out. Once she's home, slept, and calmed down, they could try to ask again."

Ikebe stopped short in his answer.

The village was small. At some point, that conversation would become a rumor, one which would probably come back through the temple. Ikebe who came into Sotoba from the city, was unpleasantly familiar with the narrowness of the "society" of the village.

(Even though he's a good person....)

Ikebe thought. Towards the assistant head priest, Ikebe held unconditional good will. Yet, there were people saying strange things. Just like before when the child was hit, he couldn't help but wonder why.

Honestly, thought Ikebe, suddenly remembering a rumor he had overheard. He stole the faintest side glance at Seishin's profile.

It was a rumor he could certainly never ask Mitsuo or Tsurumi about. Was it really true? Maybe the reason the villagers looked upon him so strangely was---

-could it be because of that?

Part 7

It was the day after Megumi had been found that Shimizu called Toshio---by the calendar date, it would be called that same night. Toshio picked up the receiver to Shimizu's trembling voice informing him that Megumi's condition seemed off, and that he wanted an examination.

"Off? What is her condition?"

"That's..." Shimizu hesitated. "It doesn't seem like anything hurts, from the way she's acting. I don't know how to put it, but it seems like she's in a daze. According to my wife, since she was found in the mountains this morning, she's been like this the whole day."

Toshio tilted his head. "If you put it like that, I can't really say. If you don't give me something more specific...."

"That's why I'm asking if you could please come and examine her."

"I don't want you to think I'm trying to get out of making a house call." As Toshio said that, Kyouko and Takae who were seated on the sofa watching TV turned to look at him. "Anyway, if I don't ask about her condition, I won't know how to prepare either. Even if I only do the bare minimal treatment myself, if we can't say what she needs, then I can't very well bring her to the hospital, either. ---She have a fever?"

"She doesn't seem to."

"How's her appetite?"

"It seems she hasn't laid a hand on anything since this morning."

"Does it seem to hurt anywhere?"

"No. It doesn't especially seem like something in particular hurts. But, even if we talk to her she doesn't respond, like she's not even paying attention," said Shimizu, continuing with an audible gritting of his teeth. "I really think it'd be best if we brought her there for an overnight observation, but. That's---my wife is worried enough, after everything else. I'm sorry to ask, but could you please

come and have a look at her?"

Toshio sighed. "I understand. Anyway, I'll make preparations and be on my way."

As he hung up the receiver, Takae shot him a sharp eyed glance, then ostentatiously looked up to the clock on the wall. Kyouko shrugged her shoulders and offered Toshio a sympathetic look, then looked away.

"A house call? At this hour!"

Toshio, too, looked to the clock. It was already past ten.

"Oh really, if they could at least think of the hour, don't you agree?"

Regardless of the hour, Shimizu was worried enough about his daughter to call him, Toshio thought, but he didn't bother to voice such a counter. In these cases, he'd already accepted that saying anything to his mother was useless. With no particular response, he left the living room, Takae following behind.

"It's because you're always so accessible to them. You're so easy to work in the ground. --Just who was it?"

"Shimizu-san's place," he answered heading into the hospital.

"Speaking of the Shimizu line, weren't they looking for their daughter? She was found?"

"Guess so," he said going through the hallway door. Toshio secretly referred to this hallway as the buffer zone. The door to the waiting room was an international boundary. Takae seldom set foot in the buffer zone, much less crossed into foreign lands. But, tonight Takae was in rare form, apparently in the mood to cross the border herself.

"Guess so, you say. What happened to Takami-san? He didn't come to report?"

"He didn't have to, did he?"

"Well of course he had to! Didn't he come all the way here yesterday to report that a girl was missing? And with a tone as if you should be expected to search with him. After coming by like that, doesn't it only follow that he owes a report on what happened from there? In the first place, you are a member of

the neighborhood watch committee. If something happens, you do need to hear about it."

"It's not like I searched with them, and it's not like anything special happened."

"It is obvious that something did happen, a young girl went missing until such an hour. Or are you saying she said nothing to her parents and stayed out over night?"

"Mom." Toshio breathed a deep sigh and turned around. You could say Takae coming all the way to the waiting room was a rare sight. But, of course it wasn't one that pleased him in the slightest. "I heard that Megumi got hurt somehow or another in the mountains and couldn't move. After that, her condition still seems bad. Shimizu-san came to me asking for me to examine her. As a doctor, I have patients. I have to get out there quickly. Save any talk like this for after I've returned."

Takae was clearly let down. "It isn't as if this is a discussion simply for my curiosity, you realize. I am asking what you think of how easily you let yourself be worked by them."

"Mother."

"Is the daughter of the Shimizu household in such a condition that you need to go out at this hour? If you just easily let yourself be dragged out of here, what if a patient who really is having a dire emergency comes while you are out?"

"If it's a dire emergency, they'd call an ambulance before me. Everyone's got the common sense for that."

"Toshio."

"Anyway, I'm off."

Toshio entered the waiting room. As expected, Takae didn't have it in her to chase him all the way into the waiting room. Takae hated the waiting room. To think the former Medical Director's Office is now in this state, she'd say. It was just so pitiful that she hated to even set foot inside.

Leaving Takae stranded at the other side of the door, Toshio sighed.

If someone wished to be revered as a director, to have a two-stone handicap up on everyone else, to affirm their power and influence, who the hell would come back to this village? If someone were really after that, there were plenty more lucrative positions than a medical director of a tiny hospital deep in the mountains out there for the taking in the world, but Takae didn't seem to grasp that.

No, not just Takae, thought Toshio as he left the hospital. Toshio's father was also a man who didn't understand as much. Toshio wasn't denying that standing and fame had their value. But, what kind of status really came with being a medical director of a hospital that was really only the size of a clinic in Sotoba of all places? In the first place it was just another term for another medic, so slapping on "-al director" was a joke. It wasn't any different than being the old man at any personal shop, he couldn't help but think. They didn't call them directors, so why not just call him "Boss" like the proprietors of the village's shops? --Toshio had always thought as much.

Indeed, the Ozaki Hospital did once used to be the home of the one and only physician in the area. In an era when there wasn't even a doctor in the town of Mizobe, there was apparently even an inn for patients who had to travel a long way for examinations. But, that was an era long past. Patients who were in critical condition called an ambulance. If you went to the town of Mizobe, there was a General hospital with well regulated medical equipment, and even a National Hospital. If you rushed, you could make it to the University Hospital in under three hours.

The Ozakis were left behind in the small territory that was Sotoba, where the Ozakis were revered and caught up in feeling like bigwigs with their say in village governmental affairs. If that was really what someone wanted, they'd be better off transferring to an area with more of a regional advantage, expanding their hospital. This was the end result of being unable to throw away the lifestyle that came with being honored by the bunch from the cloistered little village.

He was a frog in a shallow well. That's what he thought, every time he stepped into the showy Director's Office. He was a man who believed in an

influence that had long faded, who believed that all of the people around him believed and thought the same way that he did. Never mind that he was nothing more than a simple doctor anymore, the man refused to believe that he was an ordinary doctor then, and still going on refusing to accept as much now was his wife.

(What a strange story....)

That was the one way he didn't want to live. ---No matter what.

As he pulled up to the Shimizu's house, having heard the engine, the entryway door opened. The gate lamp was out, the sliding storm doors were drawn and the curtains tightly closed. At a glance, it appeared to be a house asleep.

"Doctor---Thank you." Shimizu Hiroko stepped out to meet him, seeming to cower into herself, her voice hushed low. She pulled on his hand to hurry him into the house, looked around to confirm that the neighbors didn't see that Toshio had come, then quickly---but without a sound, closed the door.

"I'm sorry about the hour."

Even inside the entryway, Shimizu kept his voice low.

"Where's Megumi-chan?"

"On the second floor."

Toshio stepped up from the entryway, straight towards the second floor, setting foot on the stairway when Shimizu stopped him.

"Uhm."

"Is there something wrong?"

"Actually," said Shimizu, looking away. "Somehow, Megumi's been acting off.... Even if we ask if something happened yesterday, we haven't been able to find out anything. She won't give any real answers, and even if you yell, I can't be sure if she can even hear or not."

As if offering a preview on how things would be on the second floor, Shimizu's voice was low. "Maybe, it isn't that she's sick,... how to put it, I've been thinknig it might be something mental, but."

Toshio knew his meaning and nodded. In other words, Shimizu had the same worry that Takae had. Something might have been done to his daughter's body. His daughter might have been suffering from a blow to her psyche. That was all the more reason to hide from nearby eyes, to avoid bringing her out to the hospital, and no doubt the reason they called Toshio out so late at night.

"For now, I'll examine her," Toshio showed a mindful smile. "We might find something out if we do a medical examination."

"Yes,.... That's right. Please." It's the first room on the second floor."

"Excuse me," Toshio said, heading up to the second floor. Shimizu and Hiyoko followed, as if holding their breath.

Megumi's room had a nameplate suiting a young girl. Looking at the name 'Megumi' written in bubbly letters, Toshio gave a light knock on the door before opening. In the room lined with stuffed animals and trinkets, Megumi was lying on the bed by the window.

"Megumi-chan," Toshio started, seeing that her eyes were open. "What's wrong. I hear you're not doing good?"

The bedside lamp was all that lit her face. 'Sorry, but I'll have to turn on the lights', Toshio said as he flipped on the lights. As the fluorescent light filled the room, by looking at Megumi's vacant expression, it was clear that her face was drained of color.

"You're pretty pale. ---How're you feeling?"

As Toshio knelt at her bedside, Megumi blinked as if blinded by the light. Beyond that, she showed no particular response.

"They say you're not eating? No appetite?"

Though Toshio spoke to her she didn't respond. As if she were half asleep, her gaze fell to Toshio but it didn't appear to be a gaze with any awareness.

Now then, Toshio monologued to himself. Is this a real case of psychological torpor, or---is it a performance?

Megumi was a frequent patient at the hospital. Her chest hurt or her stomach hurt, she'd say kicking up a fuss, when there was generally nothing found wrong

with her that required any treatment. While there was objectively speaking nothing wrong with her, whether there even was subjectively to the patient herself was a frequent cause of fights between Megumi and the Shimizus, since they seemed to occur whenever something she didn't like came up at school. If there was something wrong with her from time to time, it was never enough to require treatment, yet Megumi would act all the more like she had a grave disease. Like she was hoping for it. At times like these, Toshio would affix "a very mild case of" to whatever appropriate disease, and give her vitamins or some other harmless prescription. He expected it, but was that it this time?

"Cold?" Toshio asked, as he saw Megumi was wearing summer bedclothes. Megumi blinked, but offered no particular response. He took her hand to take her pulse but there was no fever. If anything, she was cool.

"You don't have a fever. The AC might be a little strong, huh?" He said while counting her pulse. A little fast. Checking her blood pressure, it was pretty low. He lifting up her eyelid to see the mucous membrane color. Just like her face, it seemed to have lost some of its hue.

"Open up your mouth." He lightly gently opened her jaw, and she did at least leave it open. There didn't seem to be anything especially wrong with her tonsils or the inside of her mouth, but as expected the healthy red color was lacking.

"Looks like anemia. ---Are you on your period?"

Even looking her in the eye when he asked, she didn't answer. She isn't, Hiroko answered.

"Open the front a bit."

Toshio took out his stethoscope. Megumi of course had no response, so Hiroko hurried over and undid Megumi's Pajama top. Toshio felt with the stethoscope, while at the same time examining Megumi's body. Traces of insect bites, small scratches and bruises, probably from when she fell on the mountain. He couldn't see anything that particularly seemed to be the aftereffects of anything violent. Just in case, he checked the palpitations down to her abdomen but there wasn't anything especially wrong there, and on her color-deprived white skin, he saw neither wounds nor bruises.

"She isn't on her period, you had said. Her there been abnormal bleeding or abnormal discharge?"

Toshio turned to look at Hiroko. Hiroko shook her head, seeming bewildered. "No... No, I don't think so."

"I see." Toshio smiled. "Probably Anemia. Just in case, I'll run a blood test. I'll need to take some blood."

That was what finally got a response. Indeed, it was an aggravated nod.

"Is there anywhere that hurts?"

"No..."

"Sleepy?"

"I am very, sleepy...."

"I see," Toshio nodded as he pricked her with the needle and took only the necessary amount of blood. "We won't know until we look over the text results but, I think it's probably anemia."

Toshio turned to face Shimizu.

"Anemia, is it?"

"It's pretty severe anemia. It happens a lot in young girls. ---Is Megumi-chan on a diet?"

At that, Hiroko nodded with a strained smile. "This girl, she's always on a diet, so..."

"That's probably part of it. Then there's this heat. There are times she probably just has a juice or some ice cream and doesn't have a proper meal, I'm sure. That can make anemia strike. We'll know for sure when the results come back but, well, in the mean time, I don't think you need to worry too much."

"Is that really true..."

"Beyond that, nothing looks too severe. Well, if she didn't already have it yesterday, when the anemia did strike, this heat might have gotten to her and caused cerebral anemia, or something like that." Saying that, Toshio looked into Shimizu's eyes, his words steeped in meaning. "There's nothing to worry

about."

Shimizu had a sudden look of understanding. "Is that so...."

"When anemia is bad, you can feel wiped out, and the tendency towards torpor develops. You can sleep and sleep and still be sleepy. There are no bumps on her head, and it doesn't seem like she had a strong blow to her head or anything when she fell, so the reason she's spaced out is probably the anemia, too." Toshio smiled. "Anyway, I'll write a prescription for some vitamins, so please come pick them up tomorrow. Then in a week, we'll see how she is. If before then her condition changes, please bring her in."

Good grief, Shimizu let out, along with a smile that seemed slightly wry. "Honestly, this girl gets people riled up. I am sorry, for calling you out so late."

"I don't mind. Aren't we glad it was nothing?"

"Yeah. I am sorry for the trouble over nothing."

Toshio turned to look back at Megumi.

"It's not that I don't understand a maiden's heart or anything, but if you're going to diet, don't do it to an unhealthy point. Whatever else you do, not eating 'cause you want to lose weight won't work. If you don't count calories and do it in a more measured way, the only result is going to be hurting yourself."

Megumi blinked as if it were bright, then gave a small nod.

"If you do that and your body breaks down, you'll be hospitalized and have nutrients pushed on you, you know. With that you'll gain 10 kilos in no time."

"Meanie," Megumi murmured with a small voice and a smile. Toshio smiled and stood. He nodded to the obviously relieved Shimizu and Hiroko.

"Take care."

Chapter 6 Translation Notes

Chapter 6 - 3

*Shimizu-san and his wife are at the **police box**, people are gathering.*

In Japan there are police boxes called koban that are not stations with call centers or dispatchers, but where police are always stationed, either to respond to a nearby situation, to take lost and found items, to give directions, or to generally keep the peace. Sotoba has no station, but Takami does have a police box, which is like his personal station. They're considerably more spacious than the old European ones which are standing room only. They tend to have tea and such for anemics who have fainted, etc.

[An example from Wikimedia Commons.](#)

Though, out in the country where space isn't at such a premium, Sotoba's may be more like this example, also from

[Wikimedia Commons.](#)

Chapter 6 - 4

Haori

- A type of Japanese cloth overcoat.

[Example image](#) from www.kimonosource.com.

*With his body turned so that Takae wouldn't see from behind him, he raised his hand in an **apologetic gesture**.*

Forearm up, hand in front of the face as if doing a karate chop, often with a slight bow forward.

[Examples](#) with [Misato](#)

from Evangelion. A more

[generic example](#).

Chapter 6 - 6

*...a man wearing a fire brigade **happi coat** turned to face him.*

Another Japanese cloth coat, often with large crests on the back to identify a team, unit, group or shop the wearer belongs to. Typically associated with labor workers, but they do have their place in traditional, formal situations as well.

[Example image](#).

"If it was me, I'd spread it all over right away though. At the end of the day, I'm

a *Hachigoro* at heart."

Hachigoro was a name frequently used in

Rakugo

, which are story telling acts performed by a single person doing all of the voices, and usually with minimal or no narration. While the name was used often it was never necessarily the same character, so much as it was a stock name, Hachigoros did have some specific reoccurring tendencies, such as pretending to be more high class or intelligent than he was and (trying to) speak and act in a classy manor, perhaps imitating another he'd seen use such social skills to their benefit, while ultimately being a buffoon. Hachigoro was considered a samurai name, and thus back then it was ironic to have someone associated with the noble classes being the butt of so many jokes, but on the other hand the character is often considered very easy to relate to because of his simpleton nature, and usually did not actually (or at least, did not honestly) have high status or position, frequently being a laborer or layabout. This has made the name associated with fairly polite every-man types and Joe Blows.

In short, Ikebe may be a monk, but he's saying he's pretty ordinary and likes to talk as much as anyone. Incidentally, a famous Hachigoro rakugo happens to be about the time when he pretend to be a monk simply because a temple lacked a head priest and he happened to be bald.

Chapter 7

Part 1

"Hey, why do we light a fire?" Katou Yuusuke asked his grandmother, who was bent over the road beside their house. It was already starting to get dark out. Along the road that followed the mountain stream, he could see yellow lights dotting here and there. They were the lights of flames. His grandmother Yukie was leaning over the road just like the others from the neighborhood, lighting a pile of wood chips on the asphalt on fire.

"We do this to welcome our ancestors. That's because today is Obon. They're all in the mountains, so without a sign like this, they might not come back."

"Our an-ses-tors?"

"Grandma's father and mother and their mothers and fathers, people like that."

Yuusuke's eyes widened a little. "Grandma had a father and mother, too?"

Yukie let out a light laugh. "Well, I must have! People don't come from trees, after all."

"From trees?"

"It means if there is a person, they must have certainly had a father and a mother. That's how everyone is born. I'm saying there are fathers and mothers all the way back."

"And those people, where are they?"

"In the mountains. They're all dead, so they're in their graves in the mountains."

Yuusuke stiffened. "Dead people? They're coming back?"

"Yes. During Obon the lid comes off of Hell. Then they can return home," Yukie said, smiling at her grandson. "Yuu-chan's mother will be coming back, too."

She was a bright, cheerful daughter-in-law. She had a frank manner of speaking, one that could certainly frustrate Yukie, but looking back she could only think she had indeed been a fine wife. She didn't dislike the business nor was she afraid of work. She worked at double Yukie's pace, swift in all she did, and while she did make mistakes for that, it was hard to hold it against her. The girl was the very picture of health; it was unthinkable that she would go first. She was burly, with thick arms. When those arms at some point became smaller, when Yukie had said to her, have you been losing weight, she smiled proudly. It's nothing to be happy about, you're too thin---by the time she had thought that, it was already too late.

Yukie looked on as Yuusuke stared into the welcoming fire. Yuusuke had started primary school. He was smaller than the others but he was a healthy boy.

(Come back, have a look at him for yourself...)

Her son who had only just begun to walk after her at last back then was now already this big.

Yuusuke compared the welcoming fire to those surrounding. Maybe he was looking for his mother in the darkness. Thinking such with compassion, she gave a lonely smile only for Yuusuke to suddenly rush over to the water bucket.

"Grandma, let's put them out!"

"---Yuusuke!" Shocked, wondering what he was saying, she stopped his hands on the bucket.

"Let's put them out! Please!"

"If we put the fire out, your mom won't come back, will she?"

"But!" Yuusuke cried at Yukie when his breath stopped. Over his grandmother's shoulder, as she bent over the small fire, in the darkness, he saw a white shadow.

(If we don't put out the fire....)

It swayed and grew bit by bit. Before he could grip the handle of the bucket, it grew bigger still. It was across the road, coming closer to the open air flames.

Yuusuke hid behind his grandmother, clinging to her. The faded handle of the bucket warped in Yuusuke's hand.

--When the dead return, that's a ghost.

Yuusuke was fixated on the shadow that was approaching. Sneaking footsteps approached, until finally that tall figure's feet stepped into the light of the fire.

(Oni are coming down from the mountains.)

Yuusuke shrunk behind his grandmother's back, still unable to take his eyes from the approaching shadow, watching it pass by from behind that back.

White clothing, white pants, a white face atop the slender figure.

"...Good evening." It said, with a smile. Yuusuke saw it as a demonic smile. Clinging to his grandmother's clothing, he took a step backwards but his grandmother showed no signs of fleeing, looking up and then bowing her head.

"Good evening," said Yukie, turning back to face Yuusuke. "Yuusuke, where's your 'good evening'?"

Yuusuke, still looking up at the man, shook his head.

"Now be polite and give a proper greeting," Yukie chided, standing up. She pulled Yuusuke forward, with a light nod to the man.

"It's a good Bon night, isn't it."

It is, the man smiled. Yukie examined the figure. He was in about his mid-forties, probably? He was slender, but still a man whose body line suggested dignity, in a suit that flattered his form. It may have been linen, and it was well tailored. His was an unfamiliar face but she knew who he was right away. He had no necktie but his clothing was color coordinated, adorned in leather shoes of a brown hue that went well with the linen suit. Of the villagers, there were none who would dress like this for walking the village at night. ---At least until now, there hadn't been.

"By chance, are you Kanemasa?" Yukie looked up at the Western mountain. "You are the good people who moved in there, aren't you?"

Yes, the man smiled with a light nod.

"Are you taking a walk?"

"I'd thought I'd seen open air fires about and recalled that it was Obon. I had completely forgotten," the man said, surveying his surroundings. Soon, his gaze returned down to Yukie. "I am Kirishiki Seishirou. It was a pleasure to meet you tonight."

"Oh my, likewise."

"Might this be your grandson?"

Seishirou looked at Yuusuke cowering behind Yukie as if he were leering over him. Yuusuke turned into her arm and tucked into her side as if to run from that gaze.

"Yuusuke, where are your manners?"

Good evening, a child's voice could just barely be heard to say, while he still refused to budge from Yukie's shadow.

"You'll have to excuse him. The child has a terrible fear of strangers."

Seishirou smiled. "No, that's simply how children are, I suppose."

"Do you have children, Kirishiki-san?"

"I do have a daughter who has turned thirteen. My daughter as well is shy of strangers. ---Yuusuke-kun? A pleasure."

Being stared at by the man, Yuusuke all the more tightly gripped at Yukie's clothing. On that exceedingly white face, and beneath those slender eyebrows, the skin about and beneath his eyes made no motions of a smile, even while the corners of his thin lips rose. It was a bad type of smile, or at least Yuusuke thought so.

(It's because of the open fire.)

They did something as crazy as lighting fires to lead ghosts to the house.

(Even though if it comes down from the mountains, it's obviously an Oni...)

Part 2

"Mom, I'm going to Megumi's!" Kaori called to her mother in the kitchen.

"Oh, a get-well visit?"

Yup, Kaori nodded. "I have a book to bring back to her, too."

"I see. There are some grapes in the refrigerator, bring those with you."

"It'll be all right."

"You can't go empty handed. I bought them as an offering for the holiday, anyway."

As told by her mother, Kaori opened the fridge. Inside were a box of chilled muscat grapes. Taking them out and bringing them together with the book, Kaori put on the slipper by the kitchen door and headed out. In the cooling night wind, people could be seen here and there standing about after lighting the welcoming fires.

Love popped his face out from his dog house wanting to go along, but Kaori shook her head and walked along the roads at night. The tap tap of her sandals mingled with the voices of the insects behind her.

Night in the village were generally dark but that wasn't the case at all in Kaori's neighborhood. As soon as she left the house, there was the Ootsuka Sawmill lumberyard, and beyond that wide field was the national highway. The highway was between that plot and the Kusunoki Stand. The bright light from the gas station shone undeterred, lighting up the surroundings, much more reliably than any telephone pole street lights could have.

The cooling night air was very settling and calming. Easy going, she passed by the lumberyard when, illuminated by the light of the gasoline stand, she could see Ootsuka Yasuyuki pointing towards the lumber. Yasuyuki was already past thirty, much older than Kaori, but he felt like a big brother figure from around the neighborhood. Maybe it was because ever since her little brother Akira was young, he'd let them come over and lpay incessantly. That Yasuyuki was pointing to the mountain of lumber, talking to a figure beside him about something. Even though it's Obon, he's working this late, thought Kaori as her walking slowed, when she caught sight of the woman she had never seen

before at Yasuki's side.

Yasuyuki was still unwed. He had a good temperament but the problem was that he was shy, so she had heard that the little old lady from Ootsuka Lumber had said. He was looking to be set up for a marriage with somebody but, with that said, the problem was with who? The age to be doing marriage interviews is in your twenties, so it's believed.

Marriage interviews and weddings, maybe it was because those talks still lingered in her mind, and because the woman was dressed in her best. She was in a white summer-knit one piece, and a transparent top over that. In white heels and a white bag, her hair was loosely put up. Her earrings glistened in the light.

(She's beautiful...)

Kaori's feet stopped. Of course her facial features were gorgeous; how to put it---she felt very sophisticated. Like an actress who would be on TV.

Maybe Yasuyuki noticed that she had been thoughtlessly just staring at them, as he turned towards her. He smiled shyly.

"Hiya, Kaori-chan. On an errand?"

"Going to Megumi-chan's."

Is that right, he said, almost blushing as he motioned to the woman beside him. "This here is the Madame of the Kirishikis. She says her name is Chizuru-san. You know, from Kanemasa."

"Heh? Kaori murmured. This was her? Then, Yasuyuki definitely wouldn't propose to her. With Yasuyuki seeming so completely flustered, she suddenly got the feeling it was a shame. It'd have been good if he could have gotten engaged.

"Good evening," Chizuru greeted. Something was coquettish about her, like a star who would be on TV, like she'd thought.

"I just met her over there a while ago. This seems to be the first time the Madame of the Kirishikis has seen a lumberyard."

Hmm, Kaori mused. When a smile rose on Chizuru's face as Kaori received her

gaze, she was suddenly conscious of herself, in a childish T-shirt and culottes with an elastic waste-band. Somehow, it was very embarrassing.

"This girl is from the neighborhood, she's called Tanaka Kaori. Right now, she's in middle school."

As Chizuru's eyes narrowed, Kaori became more and more embarrassed. You could even call her timid. If she had at least put her hair up or something. As it was, she had barely just run a comb through it.

"She's a really good girl. --Madame, do you have children?"

"I have a daughter. She is in her first year of middle school but, unfortunately, her body is weak, so going to school is..."

"Oh yeah? That must be difficult."

"Thanks to that, she's very shy of strangers. If she's able to become more healthy here, it would be good if she could make friends, but." Saying this, Chizuru smiled towards Kaori. "If you'd like, please do come by sometime."

"Ah... Yes. Likewise. Thanks." Kaori said, chewing out a response, hastily bowing her head and leaving as if running away.

(...What a surprise.)

While running clack-clack ahead, she turned back to look at the lumber yard. Yasuyuki was, face red, talking to Chizuru about something.

There really are people like that, she realized. She was like a wife in a TV drama. And furthermore.

(Her body is weak...)

A first year middle school girl. The same age as Akira. She probably didn't go to school. She was really like the star of a TV drama.

Still flustered, trotting through the night streets, if she had gone any further she'd have went right past Megumi's family's house. She hurried her limbs to a stop, hurrying towards the entryway. Though she haf always gone around to the kitchen door, tonight for some reason or other she felt like visiting from the entryway. For what was practically the first time, she stood at the entryway, pushing the doorbell.

There was an immediate response, the door opening. Megumi's mother's eyes were wide.

"Oh my, it's Kaori-chan. I thought we had a guest."

Kaori felt herself blushing. She always opened the back door and called out. There were even times when she'd just call out and go on up on her own. So she herself didn't understand very well why she was in the mood to ring the doorbell.

"Uhm.... how is Megumi-chan's condition? This is a get well visit. Uhm, this is from Mom,"

Kaori presented the box of grapes. As Megumi's mother accepted them, she murmured in surprise. "Oh, well. Thank you.What's wrong, Kaori-chan, you're so stiff."

"Well... this is a get-well visit...."

"Well. It wasn't such a big deal. It was only anemia. Anyway, go ahead on up."

"Sorry for intruding," Kaori said formally, stepping into the entryway. She slipped off her shoes and, even while told to go upstairs, she nodded, and headed to the second floor. Was this always the kind of house she had, she thought while going up the steps.

Megumi's house was, compared to Kaori's, very new. The walls were mortar and plaster but adorned with wallpaper, and the floor was distinctly western in style. Megumi's mother, being a fastidious person, kept the house well cleaned, with flowers arranged in the entryway, and small trinkets lining the shelves. Kaori had always thought of Megumi's house like this, as a place that had felt very stylish.

And yet, tonight, it looked different. Megumi's mother didn't go as far as to wear casual night gowns like Kaori's mother but, she was indeed dressed comfortably and normally, and she had no makeup on. The inside of the house, too, if you looked closely, was already starting to show the colors of age, and the florists's decorations, too, seemed somewhat jumbled up.

With a complicated feeling, she climbed the stairs to Megumi's room, where there was a stuffed animal beneath the bedroom door nameplate, holding onto

a dried flower but, something about that, too, seemed to have a layer of dust, as if it, too, were going terribly downhill.

She knocked and opened the door. The truth was that Kaori had always admired the perfectly western room of Megumi's, overflowing with girlish little knickknacks and yet, tonight under the florescent lights, it seemed terribly washed out. It was a completely ordinary room. The only thing different from Kaori's old worn out room was just that it was filled with newer things, nothing more---

"Megumi-chan, how are you feeling?"

She entered the room and came by the bedside. It didn't seem like Megumi was asleep, her eyes were open, with a gloomy look.

"You're looking pale. Are you okay?"

Megumi gave a sluggish nod, but she might have just been half asleep.

Kaori pulled out a small stool that a stuffed animal had been sitting on, moved the stuffed animal out of the way and sat. Considering the strange lack of vividness in the room tonight, she looked at Megumi, thinking that this was what Megumi had been staring at all this time. Kaori had come to think of Megumi's room as just amazing but maybe to Megumi it had always looked to be these colors. So, she always went up and down that hill, always looked up to that house. Certainly there was no comparison to this house and Kaori's house with that house at Kanemasa. Although, there was no doubt that the "something" that this home seemed to be faking was a "something" that house genuinely possessed.

The voices of the insects rode in on the wind through the open window. Kaori peered into Megumi's face, that seemed somehow so vastly far off.

"So, like, it was really amazing. Just now, who do you think I met?"

Megumi didn't answer. Still, her gaze, if only that, shifted towards her.

"They said their name was Kirishiki. The people from that mansion. I met the lady of the house. She's called Chizuru-san. She was such a pretty person!"

Megumi's shoulder had only a twitch of movement.

"It's the first time I'd seem someone put on makeup and earrings, even though she was just walking through the village! But, it really suited her. It didn't feel flashy like, it was more what you'd call elegant, maybe?"

"I know...."

Eh, Kaori looked at Megumi. Megumi's expression seemed to possess a certain bite to it.

"I know... at least, that much."

Kaori blinked as Megumi wore a thin smile. Some part of her expression seemed to be scoffing at Kaori.

"She's beautiful.... so, very beautiful...."

Kaori tilted her head, watching Megumi's facial expression attentively.

Part 3

Miwako knelt over the welcoming fire, fixedly watching as the flame burned out. Seishin watched over his mother's form much the same way.

They may have been a temple family, but they still had ancestral spirits. Miwako dutifully set out to meet them every year. In Sotoba, they burned firs rather than hemp. Burning chips of firs released the visitors from within the firs. Miwako set out beside the welcoming fire a horse made of cucumber and a cow made of eggplant, facing the main wing of the house.

Every year, each time he looked at the small ride-able animals, he thought it'd have been fine to have them facing the outdoors. It was said they were positioned so one could ride on their backs towards the house but they could also serve the function of being ridden back when they returned to the grave just as well.

Miwako remained crouching, without a word. What she was so silently caught up in thoughts about each year, he didn't know. Perhaps it was her own deceased father, or maybe her eldest brother who died young. Even from before Seishin had come to look over the welcoming fire with her, Miwako was

like this, eternally silent with her thoughts. Kneeling and looking only at the flame, she was occluded to him. Thus somehow, he had the feeling that she was not thinking of the dead of this family, but of the one whose homecoming was some other place. She was not thinking of the spirits invited to this home, but to the dead being invited elsewhere, the dead that she had no right to invite to this house. ---Whenever experience this feeling, Seishin thought of how while he knew Muroi Miwako quite well, he knew nothing of Yamamura Miwako.

Seishin was pleased with the village's Bon. The families here and there, their street corners lit with flame, had their family altars visible through transparent reed screens, lit with candles and Bon lanterns resembling revolving lamps. In the village, the thirteenth was the welcoming or Mukae Bon, the fourteenth was memorial services, the fifteenth was the dance of Bon Odori, and the sixteenth was the send off or Okuri Bon. Welcome, pray, comfort, see off. ---- The dead awoke. In the midst of the days of toiling to one's own death, on this night, when the forgotten dead had life breathed into them together with the welcoming flame, once living beings and the days they left behind were all contained in the feeble embers; in other words, they were revived within the light of the Bon lanterns.

From behind he heard a small sigh like sound. As he turned to look back, Miwako scooped a ladle of water from the bucket. She gathered the small horse and cow in her arms and stood.

"I will be returning ahead."

There was his mother's usual face. It was not a motherly face, but merely the face of the one known as "mother" to him.

Seishin nodded and saw his mother off, then looked down at the road leading to the shrine. There was one less light, now. Captivated by the night winds, he idly walked along through the mountain gate. He walked halfway down the stone steps, then sat. The lights he could see far off became faint and then vanished.

The dead revived and returned to their nostalgic homes. To where they belonged. As for him,

He left behind a hollow grave. There he was embraced in pitch black darkness awaiting impatiently the emissary. Return to your own resting place, the earth wailed. In a betrayal of the fate of divine providence, why did the sin laden earth wish for such so resolutely?

Seishin smiled faintly and shook his head. As he thought to stand to return home, he saw a white shadow yonder on the night road.

At last from before him, he saw a white, pale outline of a human form. It came again tonight from the grave.

Seishin watched over it. Soon it revealed itself as a small statured person. Drawing closer with steps lacking in destination the figure came close enough to be seen as a young girl, stopping as if she had noticed Seishin. Soon the girl was, with a distinct sense of purpose, walking towards him. Finally arriving at the bottom of the stone steps, she looked up at Seishin.

The manner in which she tilted her head was child-like. A hydrangea colored one piece outlined her thin frame. She seemed to be twelve or thirteen. Her long hair settled over her thin shoulders with a soft, silky sound.

"---Muroi-san?"

Seishin nodded. He had never seen the girl before. She didn't have the aura of one from Sotoba. Who it was, he quickly deduced.

With no hint of bashfulness to her, the girl casually ascended the stone stairway. She rose until she was able to meet evenly the seated Seishin's gaze, her feet coming to a stop.

"You are Muroi-san, aren't you?" The girl said. Maybe it was because she could not bask in the sun; her skin was white like wax.

"That's right, but..."

The girl smiled and folded her slender arms behind her back. "I rather like your works."

Having that said to him out of the blue, Seishin's eyes widened. For a moment, he was at a loss for words.

The girl inclined her head like a puppet.

"You are Muroi-san, yes? Of
Minotaur."

"Ah... yes. But," Seishin took a long, hard look at the young girl's face in bewilderment. "You've read it?"

"Yes. I have read it. Is it strange?"

"No," Seishin forced a smile. "Thank you. I think that you are probably my youngest reader."

She made as if to suppress a giggle.

"Oh yes, there were some difficult words, too," she added in with blunt, fast talk. "But, I do believe that any human can understand the feeling that they have been abandoned by God."

"Do you like books?"

"Oh yes. I like them. I've read many," said the little girl, adding further. "Indiscriminately. The truth is your book, too, was one I had borrowed from my father's shelves. There were six long novels, and two volumes of short stories. If that is all of them, I have read them all."

"That's amazing." Seishin showed a smile, but inside, he was dismayed. "That's all of them. This is the first I've met someone who's read all of them."

"Also there have been times I've seen your essays and the like in magazines. Last year, you wrote about this village, didn't you?"

Seishin blinked. "You knew it was this village?"

"I at least knew that it was where the author lived. When looking at your other books' curriculum vitae, a person may be able to suppose whereabout you live, don't you think? All that was left was to use the name of the temple in that curriculum vitae and to properly look over a map."

"I don't think this is the case but, ---you didn't look for me like that, did you?"

The little girl smiled. "The truth is, one of my father's acquaintances had brought it up. That there was an author in the village. And it had turned out to be Muroi-san. I promise you though, that I had read your works before the little old man of Takemura had told me this."

"----I see. Thank you."

"In reading over the magazine, I found that essay. A village like a shrine, it had a nice feeling. I felt I'd want to try living there," said the little girl, adding on. "I am sure that Father had thought the same. It was when I had found the essay and presented it to Father that he began to talk seriously about moving."

"That's... an honor," so he said, but the truth was that he was disturbed. The little girl fixedly watched over Seishin.

"You're troubled, it's written on your face."

"That's not it. Just--- all of this this is really something unusual for me."

"All of this?"

Seishin forced a smile. "Suddenly meeting a reader."

"Is it? If I am the first, then it is an honor."

"Without a doubt, you are the first."

The girl gave a simmering smile. "I have been very interested in you, Muroi-san. I'd hoped to try to meet you."

"You're probably disappointed I don't fit your image?"

"That's true," said the little girl, looking Seishin over again from top to bottom. "At first I had thought you were an unexpectedly normal person, to be honest? I mean, I had the feeling that Muroi-san was the type who would have a horn or a tail, after all."

"Why?"

"Because those are the humans you write about. Stories of those abandoned by God, right? So perhaps Muroi-san has a horn too, I had thought, like a Minotaur. So, I was sad that you had no horns," Seishin smiled at that girlish

way of phrasing it, and was frozen by the words that followed. "---But, even if you don't have horns, you have scars. I am satisfied with that."

Seishin stared at the little girl's face.

"...You..."

"I'm Sunako. Remember that."

"Sunako-chan, you..."

"Don't add -chan. I really hate being called that!"

Seishin closed his mouth. The little girl was really doll like, the way disgust warped her face, and unable to think what else to call her, Seishin had forgotten what it was he was going to say to her. Without thinking, he'd gripped at the wristwatch over his left wrist.

"I will tell you something, Muroi-san. The little girl set off, speaking in a small voice. "A person won't die just from cutting their wrist."

Seishin had no response. Sunako's upper half seemed to revitalize, a smile rising to her face that seemed to engulf her body. She descended lightly down the stone steps, her one piece flickering on the night road off into the distance. ---Like a phantom killer.

As if he had been struck by one attacking a random peasant to test out a new sword, Seishin watched the road down which the little girl had disappeared. There had been neither time to stand nor to call to her to stop.

"Mm, that's right," Seishin answered, however belatedly. "....I think that I probably knew that then, actually."

Part 4

"Ehh, the final memorial service? For Grandmother?"

Nao said, earning a nod from Yasumori Junko. The Maruyasu lumberyard was broad. The forklifts and trucks were at rest in the dead of the night, and on the plaza piled with lumber in every direction remained nothing of them but their

track marks. Mixed in with those were the narrow tracks of children's bicycles.

The sawmill's lumberyard was seen as a playground by children. Summer vacation's radio exercises were scheduled at the Maruyasu sawmill lumberyard for the children in this area, and the wife of the family, Junko, had the duty of overseeing that. While it was early in the morning, it'd be a lie to say it wasn't still hot out then, but, Nao at least came with her which did make it enjoyable in a way.

The gathered children would play after their exercises were finished until the lumber yard's business hours. If nothing else, all of the lumber piled about made it so that it couldn't be said to be a place free of any dangers, so when the children were there, somebody had to be with them. With how often they came, she had all the deeper a bond with the children, and on days off they'd easily come to "borrow" her. They were attached to Junko as well as Nao, and they'd been drug out from the house countless times but, being so loved could foster love in the loved, so it wasn't all that bad.

"It's shaping up to be such a big service."

"Oh, that sounds like a lot of work," Nao said, overlooking the child who was playing around at her feet with scraps of wood. "Susumu-chan, that's a no-no."

Nao took the sharpened wood scrap from her son's hand.

Last year, Junko had married into this Maruyasu Sawmill family from outside of the village. Nao was another wife who had come from outside the village. Nao had married into Yasumori Construction--commonly called the Contractors--which was a branch family of the Sawmill's family, Nao's husband being the far younger cousin of Junko's father-in-law. Their husbands were the same age, so they were more like brothers. Not only did the two husbands get along well, they were a head and branch family, so there was all kinds of involvement between them. On Bon or New Years or anything of that nature, all of the neighborhood relatives would get together at the Maruyasus.

Nao gathered up a collection of wood scraps that seemed safe, stacking them before her child.

"If it's her final memorial service, we'll be involved, too. We'll have to come help."

"I'm sorry, especially when it's so hot."

"We're both out in the country, we need to count on each other. But it really will be a hassle for Jun-chan, won't it? If you're saying that it's at the end of August, then Obon would have barely passed. You'll be doing this all over again, won't you?"

That's right, said Junko with a forced smile, turning back to look at the lit up house. From the tatami room where the extended family gathered flowed the noisy clamor of their drinking.

"At my house we didn't really have any relatives nearby, so this many people gathering for Obon was a complete shock. I'd never even seen a Buddhist memorial service before."

"Oh? Here, they're very strict about memorial services and divine works, aren't they? My mother-in-law, every morning, she goes to a religious service at the temple. I remember how shocked I was when I'd first heard that."

"As for me, I'd thought you only went to temples for funerals."

"Right?" Junko laughed. "Remembering all of the little customs can be a hassle but once you get used to it, you start to think it's nice in its own way, too."

"That's right."

Junko smiled. She had married from nearby but Junko was born in a more urban area, where relatives were far away, and she didn't meet with them. There wasn't even a family altar in the home then, and they didn't really even do most yearly holiday functions or events. That was all the more reason these fastidious, precise rituals were interesting and fun. Even the fuss of the family gathering together, while tiring on the one hand, made for a good sort of busy. Especially when looking at her husband and Nao's husband, she thought the way that those of the same generation were like brothers was a fine thing.

"If it's her final memorial ceremony, the people from the neighborhood will help too, so it shouldn't be such a hassle on the day itself. Now, there are the days before and after! It's a hassle when the family gets together but, well, that's how it goes," Nao said, turning her eyes to the main house with a laugh.

Junko smiled.

"Then, we'll make it somehow. My Mother-in-law said to make it a grand affair, so I've been put on the spot."

"It'll be all right. Jun-chan is the reliable one!"

"Not hardly!"

"Oh? You're a fine wife. My father-in-law said so himself!"

"Really?"

"Really. I mean, it's a lot of work you do! Jun-chan, your house manages the sawmill's affairs! There are live-in workers, aren't there? And on top of that, there's Grandfather."

Ah, Junko murmured. Her husband's grandfather had been bedridden for six years now. There was helping with the business and tending to the old man's care, so with three generations living in the household, with her grandfather and grandmother in laws, there was a lot to worry over. "It's really not so bad. It's my mother-in-law who sees to the people of the sawmill. Grandfather may be bedridden and require some help, but he isn't particularly demanding, and he doesn't get angry very often."

"Being able to look at it that way is part of what makes you great."

"Nao-san's the same, aren't you? With the young contractors living with you."

"We have a hostel. It's not as if they're really live-ins."

"Is that so?"

Caught up in trying to out-praise the other, Junko and Nao looked at each other and laughed.

There was a lot to stress over, but their family lives were going well. Having Nao so nearby was reassuring. At the marriage interview, she had agreed to live with the family when they had wed, and each couple had their own living room and kitchen, so there was nothing to be dissatisfied about in their living arrangements with the extended family. But---thought Junko, turning to look behind her.

The night sky was black, the western mountain ridge stretched out beneath it. It, or anything else for that matter, couldn't be seen up there in the night's pitch darkness, but that was where the new Kanemasa house was.

(A house like that...)

"I'd like to try living in a western style mansion like that just once too, though."

Thinking Nao had read her mind, Junko turned to look back at her, seeing Nao herself looking up at the scene behind them.

"---I just mean, it'd be nice to have a house you could do up the way you like, too."

Junko gave a firm nod. "It's not that I'm particularly unsatisfied with anything. But, even if I think I might like to set this up like this, I can't just adjust the house however I want."

"That's right. ...It must really be nice, that house even has an attic. I've always wanted an attic, you know."

Me too, Junko laughed. Nao gave Junko an impish look.

"A western mansion with an attic, why, it's like something out of a movie, isn't it? Marrying into a household like that would be like being swept up and away! Wouldn't it be picturesque, the ideal new married life?"

"I'm sure there'd be a mother-in-law like Rottenmeier-san."

"Oh, that's true," Nao said, her voice rising with a laugh. "---They have moved in, right, for sure now?"

"Looks like it. I don't know what kind of people they are, though."

"They never come out, they say. As expected for someone moving out into the countryside like this, they're strange."

They are, murmured Junko looking up at the black mountains. As she did, Nao nudged her elbow.

"---Hn?"

"Oh, wow. Speak of the devil, they say!"

Looking towards where Nao was pointing, rather nearby, was a figure at the edge of the lumberyard. Just beneath the streetlight at the entrance, a couple, man and woman, stood. With a look at their clothing it was clear at once they weren't of the village. Overall, the atmosphere they gave off was completely different. What left an impression on Junko, to say nothing of their clothing, was the way the two casually linked their arms. Anyone who would do that was surely not one of the married couples of this village. They must have noticed Junko and the others, giving an easy greeting.

"Good evening," was said in a deep baritone.

"Oh... Good evening," Nao answered, gathering her child into her arms as Junko followed up.

"Are you the good people of Kanemasa?"

The man spoke, the woman looking up at him with a smile. "Takemura-san had said something about that. That we are called Kanemasa, here."

"That's right," Nao smiled. "We have the habit of calling the territory around your house Kanemasa."

Ah, the man nodded. He was about in his mid forties. The woman with him looked to be somewhere around thirty. Junko's thoughts were flustered. How to describe them; polished? There was something artificial to them---their demeanor lacked a certain worldliness. She felt a rush of embarrassment at the sudden outburst drunken voices that could be heard in the background.

"We are the Kirishikis. It is such a pleasure," the woman said, her eyes going to the one in Nao's arms. Her head tilted, peeking at the child's face. "My, how cute. Is he your son?"

"Yes. He's Susumu. I am, uhm, Yasumori. And this here is--no, she is one of the family members of the Maruyasu lumber yard."

"Are the two of you sisters?"

"No. Jun-chan is---I'm a relative of hers. From the nearby Yasumori Construction."

As Nao spoke, there was another burst of laughter from the background. The man turned his eyes towards the main house.

"It's Obon. Our family is having a get together."

"Ah, yes. It is homecoming season, isn't it," the man said, looking to his wife. "Everyone gathers together like this, then!"

"That's right. If you don't have anywhere to return to, you're left out. To tell the truth, I had wondered where all of those people were disappearing too, it was mysterious!"

"I thought so, too."

Junko watched the smiling couple with a suffocating feeling. It was like watching a young couple, which was to say embarrassing. There were no married couples so openly affectionate in the village. Once you were married, you were quickly engulfed in family life, and affection gave way to comfortable familiarity.

"Do the two of you have children?"

"We do have a daughter. She's already thirteen!"

"You don't look at all like you'd have a child that old."

"Thank you very much," the woman said with a bewitching smile. Junko had the feeling that she was like a whole other life form. She wasn't like a young girl, nor like a middle aged woman, she was not like any married woman she had seen before. The man was the same. He was still a man amongst men, far from any men past forty that Junko could imagine. Outside of TV dramas.

"Uhm... If you would be interested," Nao said timidly. "Would you like to come in? As you can see, it's the middle of the party, so it's a bunch of drunks, but."

Nao nudged her lightly with her elbow, leading Junko to hastily jump in.

"Oh, yeah, please! I think our family would enjoy it, too."

The man looked to his wife as if asking her.

"Oh, but we couldn't. You're in the middle of a family gathering!"

"Oh, no, don't mind at all."

The man turned to Junko. "If we could accept your hospitality at a later date...."

"Then, please, come to our home, too," Nao said excitedly. "If you say the Contractor's place, anyone will be able to give directions. With your daughter!"

The man smiled abruptly. For a moment, Junko was startled. That smile, something about it looked terrifying. For no placeable reason, she had the feeling that something had been said that couldn't be taken back.

"Thank you so very much."

The man said, looking over Junko and Nao as if making a pledge.

"We will be coming to give our regards.Quite soon."

Part 5

"---From Kanemasa?"

Yuuki turned from the creole counter to face Katou Minoru. Katou ran the electronics shop beside Ichino bridge. He was a regular at creole, but today he came to say that Katou's mother and son had seen the owners of Kanemasa, in the early evening.

"It seems she spoke with Kirishikis," Katou said, disinterested. The way he spoke and carried himself, he seemed more like a scientific researcher than the proprietor of an electronics shop.

I see, Yuuki murmured. So they didn't exactly go around introducing themselves, but they did indeed step out of the house, he thought.

"What kind of people did you say they were?" Hasegawa casually prompted.

"Apparently rather stately. Like actors, my mother said, but."

"...Hmm. The day before yesterday, I met with the young man from

Kanemasa---Tatsumi-kun, I think it was---and I had a good feeling about the boy."

"Speaking of the day before yesterday, it seems like there was a big fuss from Shimizu-san's place, wasn't there?"

"That's right. Tatsumi-kun helped out with that. It was good we found her safe and sound."

Katou nodded. Glass in hand, he let the sound of the saxophone flow into his ears. Katou was in his mid-thirties, and was essentially a very peaceful, quiet, calm man.

"I hope that resolves those uncomfortable misunderstandings, though."

Hirosawa tilted his head at Yuuki's words. "Uncomfortable misunderstandings?"

Actually, Yuuki said, telling him about the cruel rumors he had overheard that night.

"Just being told that now that you've moved out here, you should come out, in itself won't resolve everything. Tatsumi-kun and Ikebe-kun both laughed it off, but I'm sure inside they didn't find it that funny."

I see, Hirosawa sighed. Inside the shop were only Hasegawa and Katou, Hirosawa and Yuuki, for a total of four people, and the melancholy silence settled over them even in a place that had been quiet to start with.

"Unity is a single word to refer to what, from another angle, is the exclusion of others after all," Hirosawa said with some restraint. "...But, there's no excuse for that."

Hasegawa nodded as well. "I see, then. That's why they've come down to the village. Unless they show their faces, they can't be sure what people are saying about them."

"If that's why, it's a shame."

Yuuki cocked his head. "But I do think it's strange. If it were me or the masters of Kanemasa, I understand that we'd be looked to with a suspicious eye. It's sad to say, that's what it is to be an outsider. But, Ikebe-kun and the Junior Monk

are seen the same way, so what am I to make of that? The two of them work at the temple and are well integrated into the village's society, aren't they?"

Hirosawa gave a wry smile. "Normally, people wouldn't speak ill of the temple. That group must not have been a part of the temple parish. Probably new families in Kami-Sotoba. People who came in the post-war period, likely."

"Would that matter?"

"That in itself is another case of the exclusion of others I'd spoke of. Sotoba has a history as a society of regional bonds, which means the sense of unity was strong. There were families that moved in after the war, but those families at the time were excluded, and in turn, those people developed hostility towards the society that rejected them. That isn't to say all of them did but it was the general pattern that they more or less fell into. To those people, the temple must have been seen as the enemy's leader, I imagine. The temple and Kanemasa, then later Ozaki were called the three pillars, were the heart of the village after all.

"Heeh."

"Originally the village was strongly united around the three pillars. So to new citizens, they'd be considered the final boss. In those days, Kanemasa was central to everyone's interests as long as they were living in Sotoba, so as long as he served as the village headman, Kanemasa would be revered with respect, and hostilities would be withheld. All the more for the Ozakis. Everyone was dependent on their care. But as for the temple, if you weren't a part of the parish, there was no point of relevance. They were an ideal target for those hostilities."

"I guess that would be the case."

"And in the Junior Monk's case, he's also a novelist, and having such a distinct side occupation is probably cause for some prejudice as well. There's no doubt he's a moody eccentric, they say. On the practical side, it's strange for any of the eldest sons in the village to be single past thirty. Especially since the Junior Monk is an only child, if the Junior Monk doesn't start a family, there will be no heirs, which will be problematic."

"Ah, that's true."

"The parishioners are worried about it themselves but the Junior Monk is terribly delicate in some ways, so it's as if you can't really be too aggressive with him. The head monk married late himself, and he does seem to understand his own position at least, so the parishioners are probably thinking to give him just a little more time."

Hasegawa leaned in and spoke in a hushed tone. "Is that rumor true?"

"---Rumor?"

"Yes. The Junior Monk once, that is... attempted suicide, or so it's said."

Hirosawa smiled wryly. "It seems so. I don't know anything other than the rumor either, though. That may be why those around him aren't pushing too forcefully towards marriage. If they try to force anything, his nerves will snap again, which would again become problematic."

I see, Yuuki thought. The Junior Monk from the temple, while a pillar of the village, with his side job and personal history, was another form of foreign substance in a way different from Yuuki and the others.

"Is that why there are rumors of that nature?"

"More than anything, the feelings of resentment towards the temple are the strongest. The temple--while one of the three pillars of the village, is partially separated from the village in a way."

"I don't really get it."

"It's like this. When the search went out for Megumi-chan, nobody from the Ozakis or the temple family came. Ikebe-kun came from the temple but the Junior Monk and the madame certainly didn't come. Festivals are the same. The three pillars don't participate in village festivals. Traditionally, they don't take wives from the village either, nor do their daughters marry out into the village. The Murois only have one line in the village, as do the Ozakis. That's what it means when they're said to be central to the village but separated. They're especially important, you could say."

"Important, is it?"

Hirosawa nodded and pointed to the north. "Halfway up the northern mountain is the temple. And in the western mountain is Kanemasa, and between them, Ozaki."

"Muroi, Kanemasa and Ozaki's lots are at different levels of height. The temple is on the highest grounds, the hospital the lowest. And that's how it is to the village in terms of their social standing as well."

Heeh, Yuuki murmured.

"The doctor being third feels strange to me. In a sense, aren't the lives of the village in their hands?"

"It's a long standing custom with quite a bit of history. This used to be the temple's dominion, you see, and into this territory came wood workers to establish the village. In order to be a point of contact for the wood workers who had settled here, they opened that temple. Later, when the temple's territory was disseminated, it became an independent temple from the head. As the villages were in a sense leasing the land from the temple, and with the Edo system in place where all commoners had to register with a temple, everyone was included in the temple parish. If a monk from the temple didn't deliver a prayer for the dead so that one could move on, then, why, it was as if you couldn't even die. It seems in the past the temple had also served as the public office with the family registers, so the temple had life, death, and land--really daily life itself in their grasp."

"Ah, I see."

"From birth to death, you were in the temple's palm. That's why, while it doesn't seem you can say as much of it today, in the past, well, the temple's influence was broad. That land was leased in one chunk by Kanemasa from the temple and split amongst the villagers. Which house would have how many rice fields, which territory did the mountains belong to; these distributions were the duties of Kanemasa, and Kanemasa would collect the dues and the rent for the territories."

"I see, so that's why the temple is first and Kanemasa is second. If you weren't in the temple and Kanemasa's good graces, you couldn't get by."

Hirosawa smiled. "That's how it is. ---Well, that isn't quite all. Sotoba had,

until fairly recent years, an organization called the Sotoba-Kou."

"Sotoba-Kou---from what we learned in history class, that kind of Kou?"

"That's right. Kanemasa was the representative of the Kou. The land was borrowed from the temple by the Kou. That was divided among the people by Kanemasa as the representative of the Kou. The collection of rent and the division of the land, the delegations of the Kou, and the yearly rent negotiations were all the duty of Kanemasa."

"In other words, price bargaining?"

"I suppose so. Kanemasa wasn't a company per-se, they were ultimately on the side of the villagers, as the leaders of a Kou. Then with the rental fees decided on, Kanemasa would go about gathering them and present them to the temple. The temple would keep a portion of that set aside, as emergency funds for development."

"Funds for development?"

"Yes. This was money that, in the case of a calamity or disaster or crop failure, could be loaned to the village as a Buddhist public work of sorts---in case the general public had a need, the money given as alms could be loaned to the Kou interest free. The villagers made offerings of gratitude for this, which in turn repaid the loan over a long period. There's a sluice below the highway, isn't there? The Mizuguchi dam was engineered to collect irrigation water for the crops, and it seems like it was built with that developmental fund, during the Edo period."

"Heeh...."

"Therefore, it's not simply a matter of fear. You could call it a debt of gratitude. The temple and Kanemasa were always running a three legged race together, to support the village. The ones to construct a hospital, to invite a physician, were the temple and Kanemasa. This was a time when even the town of Mizobe didn't have anything resembling a hospital, either. The temple couldn't very well loan the land out to each villager directly. Between the temple and the villagers was the house of Kanemasa, always building good will as a third party, so that it could be done at all; the village came into being with that good will as its foundation. That's why the people of the village even now

can't abandon their respect for the temple and Kanemasa."

"I see..."

"Now that's no longer so much the case but our present day community center was constructed with the donations of the three pillars of the village, and Sotoba's school districts were decided on by a three-person committee, so at heart, nothing's really changed. In that case the third party isn't Kanemasa but the Tamo head family, though."

"Haa."

"In the past, it was Muroi, Kanemasa and Ozaki. By the old system, Kanemasa, as the village headman, would take a vote at the village assembly. Kanemasa had one vote in terms of the decisions of the government, seeking an agreement between the three strongest figures of the village. The village elder had one vote, and Muroi and Ozaki each had one vote. If either Muroi or Ozaki were opposed, it could still be approved with two votes. But, if both Muroi and Ozaki were to vote no, then by two votes it would be vetoed, and sent back to the headman as the representative of the Diet. ---Well, in truth, it would be closer to say they met and discussed it over further meetings but, that was the system that we had. Now we don't have the village assembly but the district assembly. The name has changed but the system is the same. In the end, the three head figures make all final judgments and determinations. Kanemasa is no longer in the village, so the district assembly's chairman serves as the third in Kanemasa's place. As Kanemasa was originally the village's representative in the government, there really isn't any change at all."

"Ultimately, the Kou's make-up has been persistently maintained, hasn't it."

"Indeed it has. Even now the meetings between the three highest in the village are unofficial. Mostly a formality, in practice, Muroi and Ozaki hardly say no in regards to the district chief's decisions, so it's really more of a consultation. The villager's matters are settled by their representative, and the temple and Ozaki take part in that from above. As such a system is still in place, in a way it draws a line marking the temple and Ozaki as special, and the Kanemasas, too, have a line drawn between themselves and ordinary villagers."

So while they're at the heart of the village, it can be said they're not a part of the village."

"Heeh."

"As for us--that is, the inhabitants from Sotoba's former days, this isn't a matter of rationale; it's best understood as instinct, like a sensation on the skin. It's the unconditional imprinting etched into the village, cultivated through history from when the village was first erected. That the three pilalrs are special, are elite, so to speak. That said, the people who entered the village afterwards don't have that sensation. Not only do they not know the history, they probably can't understand what makes the big three so high and mighty as they are. Especially if they aren't families of the temple parish, then they have no frame of reference for the temple. So, the temple being so high and mighty must seem ill founded. The village has a strong sense of unity, which comes with the instinct to distinguish one's own from others'. The one that's the most removed on its summit, so towards the temple a certain antipathy is born."

"I see...."

Hasegawa forced a smile. "But that's rather strange, isn't it? Speaking of those new residents, it's the new people who who have the strictest view on outsiders. Of course there are exceptions in both camps but, in general it's the older houses who are more gregarious towards outsiders. There's differentiation, but without distinct discrimination. The new folks are more frank about it."

Heeh, Yuuki blinked. Katou quietly added in.

"Like an organism, isn't it?"

That simple statement, Yuuki felt, well summed up his thoughts towards the village.

"It is. ...It really is."

The village itself was an existence like a single organic life form. It came about through a complex process, with various systems writhing within its boundaries. It cycled through changes while splitting off multiplying portions of itself,

voracious and regenerating, for the maintenance of the whole being. ---Like a living animal.

Yuuki wondered, incidentally, whether this was a good thing. Not even a year ago, when he was here in Sotoba, they were partitioned out as outsiders, with vexated thoughts towards them. And still he did not regret moving here to Sotoba; yet, becoming more intimate with the village as he finally was now, he felt as this were his first time feeling the suspicious nature borne of the village's society.

Part 6

Spreading out a fresh sheet of Japanese writing paper over the desk, Seishin hunched his upper body forward slightly over it. The chair that had been used since his grandfather's time let out a creak like a sigh into the still of the night. With a spaced out stare up to the aging grains of wood on the ceiling, his vacant attentions lingered on the past, cornered by a single word.

----What the hell happened?

(Nothing...)

---Mind if I ask why?

(There wasn't any reason or anything.)

He played with his pencil in his hand as he thought.

The hard lead was sharpened to a fine tip like the point of a sword.

When he had first started writing novels, for some reason or another he had it in his mind that he should write in pen, so he made use of a fountain pen that he never did get used to. That summer, fearing the way the ink smeared, he switched to pencil. His dorm room was so hot that the air trapped between the Japanese writing paper and his left hand warped under the heat.. Just leaning forward caused the sweat to pour endlessly, the ink becoming brown and blue halos.

The reason he had used slim, hard leaded pencils for each short story was because it no matter what the grit of the pencil would end up littering the paper. He tried a different hardness of the lead, a different maker, and about the time he had found his present model, an upperclassman who had graduated had come by the dorms to hang out. Tsuchida who had entered the publishing industry took Seishin's manuscript with him, then returned with orders for him to rewrite it. How many times did he fix it, as told? After some count of times, Tsuchida took the manuscript with him and, that night, there was a phone call. We're printing it, he was told, and he remembered not having any idea what he was talking about.

---Weren't you writing looking to go pro?

Remembering that conversation, even now a wry smile leaked out. It wasn't as if he'd by any means particularly thought about becoming an author.

---Then, why did you fix every little thing every time I told you to!

Because he was told it would be better to fix it; and the next time Tsuchida came by he would ask "Did you fix it?" and so for no other reason he showed it to him.

---You are a real piece of work.

Tsuchida's voice overlapped with the dorm adviser Muramatsu's.

---It's you we're talking about, how can you not know?

(Even now I still don't.)

As if mesmerized, Seishin stared at his left hand atop the writing paper. The cheap, boorish model of wristwatch. The reason he had started wearing it was, of course, to cover the scar that was there. Now there was nothing more to see of that scar than a white line but still, if he took off his wristwatch, he himself was suddenly taken aback by what a scar it was.

---There's no way you were drunk, is there? I heard you basically never drank.

(Indeed, I have no memory of drinking.)

---If it's hard to say, a letter or anything will be fine.

The first composition he wrote, intending to sound out his own heart,

somewhere along the line became chaos, skipping from point to point, repeating itself. When he'd turned it in to Muramatsu, he appeared to be deeply, sincerely annoyed.

---I don't have any idea what you're trying to say. Isn't this a novel?

Looking at it again having been told that, it did indeed resemble a novel. The next time, he wrote from the beginning with the intent to write a novel. For Seishin who didn't particularly have anything like a hobby, it became the closest thing he had to one.

Why. Why, this of all things?

Why would you consent to sin thusly?

Why, he was asked by so many people, but Seishin couldn't answer. To tell the truth, it was because he didn't know the reason, himself. If truly pressed to say something, it was just that he wanted to try it. That was it. In his second year of college, at the end of the year party, he thought. Suddenly, he just felt like it. Vaguely, he knew that it wasn't enough to die from but, dying or not dying wasn't that important at the time, he thought now. He left the drinking party early, returning to the dormitory bathroom. It was the season of end-of-the-year parties, and the season for going home, so the community bathroom was unmanned. There, indifferent, he cut into himself.

In truth, no matter how he thought about it, Seishin couldn't think of anything that had happened for him to wish death on himself. He wasn't particularly unhappy, nor did he by any means have any particular self loathing. Because he knew that a person would not die from cutting their wrists, it was unlikely that he really wanted to die. Seishin had a feeling that at that time for himself the meaning was not in the result but in doing the act itself. It was not that he wanted to die, he didn't think it was anything other than wanting to try dying, but the origin of that impulse was one he didn't understand well even now.

Beneath the wristwatch, while hidden the scar was still evident. Everyone in the village knew about it. That was why they pretended not to see, and before Seishin knew it he was used to it. Just when, he thought, did it feel like something that people couldn't see?

(....It was not jealousy.)

Seishin gripped his pencil.

He was still possessed by something. The sudden murderous intent took him unexpectedly.

(No) Seishin murmured. He had just wanted to try it. With no murderous intent, he killed his little brother. (.... It's better this way.)

The hallway confined within grey stone was empty, dusk and dawn alike basking in its widths. The dark, dull grey pile up had no decoration aside from a glass window very high up in one corner, light shining down through it diagonally.

The light, donning a melancholy hue, glistened on the white linen cloth. Spread out above the cold stone paving, the reason for the rises and falls drawn by the white sheet was that beneath it were laid out his little brother's remains. He and the sage, with his little brother's remains interposed betwixt them, had a confrontation. And yet even so, he could not pry his eyes from the dull light of the linen cloth, and because of that very light shining down, he, in the dimmer still light, had the sensation of a singularly abandoned orphan.

----Why would thou commit such a sin?

The sage had been asking him such through dusk. And yet even so, he could not answer. If you wish to know why it was because him himself did not know the reason that he had killed his little brother.

He was the one who wanted to ask why.

His single blood relative, gentle and with a profound kindness, like an incarnation of splendor itself was his brethern. He did, in reality, love his brother, and liked living together with his little brother. As to why he had to kill his little brother, he had no sort of reason at all. Yet nevertheless, he took up arms against his brother.

It was an impulse of an attack. Surely, there was no murderous intent towards his brother. Yet raising a weapon against his brother certainly did bring about his brother's death as a result.

That little brother became a Shiki and trailed him across the wasteland. His futile stare seemed always to be asking, always, why? Had he a clear reason for

murderous intent, if he'd had any grounds on which to criticize his brother, or had it been self defense, he would have to please forgiveness and yet, he had none of them and he could not. He could do not but hate that fleeting impulse, not but grieve that its result was his little brother's death. ----That wasn't its intention.

I definitely never hated you.

It wasn't like I'd wanted you to die. There wasn't anything I wanted to get revenge for or make you realize.

Forgive me, into the dawn he moaned, taking to his knees upon the cold wastelands. His brother's answer, of course, did not come.

Seeking a gust of wind into which he could fathom an auditory hallucination, he at last fell to sleep.

Chapter 7 Translation Notes

Bon

notes from chapter 1 expanded upon with information relevant to Chapter 7 [here](#)

: These include the

cucumber horse and **eggplant cow**,

a Bon tradition.

Chapter 7 - 2

Marriage Interviews

(O)miai

, usually translated as arranged marriages, are more like meetings and dates with the explicit intent of marriage. Typical ages for these meetings are 23-30, and are often set up by parents who feel the adult child is not seeking enough initiative to wed on their own. Marriage Interviews can be set up by family, friends, or by the person themselves, either formally with a company or otherwise. In the more formal ones, the families meet and compare their compatibility. Looks, education, employment, pedigree, social status, *etc.* are all

considered, usually before the first actual meeting between the two to be wed. After the decision is reached based on the statistics on paper, and the first in person meeting, there are usually three to five dates had before determining whether to wed or not. The initial vetting process is ideally strict enough to avoid the potential embarrassment of an embarrassingly personal refusal at such a late stage.

They are declining in popularity as ideas of a more natural romance and courtship have become more popular. In a closed region such as Sotoba where new prospects are understandably harder to come by, the appeal is obvious. This is how Junko and other women who married out of the town into Sotoba most likely met up with their husbands, if they did not meet in college such as Kyouko and Toshio. The woman typically moves in with the man rather than the reverse, so Sotoba women who have interviews would generally leave the village upon deciding to wed.

Chapter 7 - 3

Cucumber horses and eggplant cows.

A Bon tradition. In some regions, they are both put out, facing the house, for the spirits to ride in on. In others, the horse is put out during

Mukae-bon

for a fast return home and the cow during

Okuri-bon

for a slow return to the afterlife. The opposite also occurs, to express fear/respect of a lingering spirit.

[Example](#)

image from Musashi Restaurant.

Chapter 7 - 4

*"I'm sure there'd be a mother-n-law like **Rottenmeier-san**."* -

A reference to Johanna Spyri's work,

Heidi

. Miss Rottenmeier is strict and decidedly not fun nanny figure within the story.

Heidi

was made into a very successful, popular anime series in the 70s and is very well known amongst Japanese adults (or at least, people who were adults in the 90s such as in Shiki; people currently in their 20s, perhaps not so much).

Chapter 7 - 5

Kou

Japanese RoSCAs, historically run by communities since before Japan was strongly united under a single government or wide scale banking. Set up by communities for themselves, all members bring a fixed amount of money to the pot and then who gets to take out how much at each meeting is decided, by a representative, by putting in more money/bidding, or by lottery. Those who received continue to pay into the pot at future meetings, with an interest-adjusted rate to assure those who had their share of the pot later have not put in more than they receive when their turn arrives. The people continue to come to meetings until everybody has had a share. Once all people have had a share, the unit may be dissolved. At times small local governments would form organizations of this nature in order to fund welfare programs, such as during poor harvests, by delegating it to the neediest portion quickly. Because such arrangements were largely regional, the likelihood of failing to meet one's obligation or leaving early was low. As they were frequently community endeavors, at times who received first could be determined based on need or by a representative with little risk, as involvement was voluntary.

Three Pillars -

a continuation of the

[Murakata](#)

matter.

The situation described between the temple, Kanemasa, and the Ozaki house is a reflection of the common style of governance of villages during the Edo period. Called the Murakata Sanyaku, or the three roles of the Murakata, it consisted of the following roles: The village headman, the village elder (also occasionally called the group leader) and the people's representative. How each position was assigned varied from votes to appointment by outside sources, throughout history and territories. In summary, the three were involved in civil administration of the village.

The village headman was generally responsible for the overall delegation and governing of the village. the elder assisted, and the people's representative was an auditor. This was the general rule and not an absolute, as things varied region to region.

Chapter 8

Part 1

On the morning of the fifteenth, Toshio was roused from sleep by a single telephone ring. Rubbing at his sleepy eyes, he reluctantly picked up the receiver, which let out a dismayed woman's voice. What was being shouted, what it was saying, he couldn't really tell.

"I don't know who this is but, could I get you to calm down for me?" Toshio bit back a yawn. Good grief, he realized. It was finally Bon, a day off, and he thought he'd be freed from early morning examinations. "---Calm down. I'm going to ask you some questions, try to answer them for me. Who are you?"

This is Shimizu, said a voice at its wits end. It was a half crying scream raised out in accusation.

"Shimizu---" Toshio suddenly felt himself waking up quickly. "Shimizu-san's wife? Did something happen with Megumi-chan?"

The woman broke down crying into the phone. From the bitter voice, he could only pick up bits and parts of words. Megumi, breathing, dead, even shaking her.

"I'm coming now, within fifteen minutes. Is that all right?"

He said firmly, hanging up the phone without waiting for an answer. He didn't know the gist of things but what he did know was that Megumi's condition had taken a sudden turn.

Rushing out of the room without a moment's delay, he received a suspicious look from Takae and Kyouko who poked their faces out.

"What is this ruckus?"

"Her condition took a sharp turn. Shimizu-san's place's Megumi-chan."

Dear, said Takae, at a loss for words. Kyouko looked most unamused as she

let out a yawn.

"I'm going."

Takae arched a brow as she watched Toshio half-jog down the hall to the bathroom, stripping off his night clothes. Hurried noises came from within the bathroom. Kyouko yawned again, going up the steps. Takae called up after her.

"At least put together something to wear, won't you?"

Kyouko's legs, bare from the camisole down, stopped on the steps. She looked down at Takae from halfway up the staircase.

"You needn't worry."

Feeling something mocking in those words, Takae looked up at Kyouko with sharp eyes. Even if she said that, there had never been a time in her life when she'd went out dressed decently, this girl!

"An emergency case could come blustering in, so if you don't at least make yourself presentable to whoever may come flying in, it will be troubling. It may be hot, but that is---"

Takae's words were cut down flatly.

"It doesn't trouble me at all," she said, putting one hand on her hip, the other on the banister. She made a performance of crossing her shapely, white legs. Takae could feel the blood rushing to her face.

"Now that is simply
not funny!"

"Whoever does come flying in will at least know that they're paying a sudden visit while we're asleep in bed, so they'll just have to overlook such things."

"Kyouko-san----"

Toshio nudged past Takae as she had started to speak.

"Mom, move, please."

Kyouko revealed a hint of a smile, at which Takae could feel herself blushing hotly. Without seeming to realize the situation between the two, Toshio hurried up the steps. Kyouko called after him.

"Nee, I'm really
sleepy..."

Toshio's tone was unambiguous. "Don't worry about it. Go to bed."

Kyouko looked triumphantly down at Takae, stretching ostentatiously as she climbed the stairs. Takae was for the moment too overwhelmed with emotion to do anything but stand there.

Not even sparing the time to shave, Toshio came rushing to the Shimizu house just over ten minutes after having hung up the phone. He got out of the car with his medical bag and hurried to the entryway, the door opened as it they were inside waiting. Still in her nightwear, Hiroko clung to Toshio as if she were drowning.

"Megumi is---
Megumi!"

Nodding and giving a pat to the sobbing Hiroko's shoulder, he let himself in and up to the second story in a hurry. The door with the stuffed animal hanging off of it was left open, Shimizu seen standing there dumbfounded.

"Shimizu-san." Shimizu turned to face Toshio who had called out to him. The color of his face changed quickly. In an instant, realizing the rage openly on his face and ashamed of it, he turned away. When Toshio entered the room Shimizu's own father Tokurou sat in the shadow of the doorway covering his face. Toshio quietly took in a deep breath.

---It's possible that it's the worst possible scenario.

Having stepped into the room and turned his eyes towards the bed, he determined it would be hard to draw any other conclusion. The girl laid out in the bed's facial muscles were slack, her features having visibly changed. It meant she was dead. And furthermore, that it wasn't something that had just happened moments ago.

Hearing Hiroko call for Megumi as she came up the stairs, Toshio sat his bag down at her bedside. For the time being he took ahold of the hand laying atop the summer towel like blanket. Indeed it was cool, and the softness of the living

was clearly lost to it now.

He quietly sought a pulse. He couldn't feel one at all. Even feeling at her neck, there was nothing. Beneath her lightly closed eyelids, her pupils were dilated. He opened his bag and took out his stethoscope, sliding it softly just beneath the neckline of her clothing but, it was completely silent. Her breath and her heart rate were both completely ceased. Letting out a breath, Toshio removed the stethoscope.

"----I knew it, she's dead, isn't she?"

The voice of Shimizu lingering behind him sounded as if it were being murmured through grit teeth.

"She is dead."

No, Hiroko voiced. "I mean, Doctor, didn't you say that Megumi had anemia? Would plain anemia be, would it---"

"Won't you stop it?" Shimizu said in an angry, low voice. "This isn't the Junior Doctor's fault. You take grandpa and look after him."

"But..."

"Go."

Toshio turned around just as Hiroko was putting a hand on Tokurou's arm, sobbing. Tokurou covered his face as he pulled her along out of the room. While being taken out of the room as if being practically carried, Hiroko cast a glare filled with resentment towards Toshio.

Toshio let out a deep breath.

"I don't know what you'll think of me saying this but, my condolences."

"Why did Megumi die?"

"That's something we won't know unless we examine her," Toshio said as he turned his eyes towards Megumi's bed. Her night closed were undisturbed, and her bedding wasn't in disarray. Her limbs were splayed in a calm position, so at least there was no mistake that Megumi hadn't suffered.

"Do people die from simple anemia?"

Shimizu was trying with all his might to suppress the blame in his voice, but he wasn't very successful.

"In cases where the anemia is a symptom of some other deficiency or defect, it is possible."

"Some other deficiency or---"

Remaining seated, Toshio turned and looked up at the bristling Shimizu.

"Anemia is the name of a symptom, not the name of a sickness. There are times when anemia just happens but, there are times when something malfunctions in the body, and anemia occurs because of that. Normally, in those cases, there are signs that that's the case, though."

"Are you saying that's what happened to Megumi?"

"I don't know. At this point I can't say anything without an analysis. At the very least, if we had the results of the blood sample I'd taken the other day, I might know something but unfortunately the results haven't come back yet. It's right over the Bon holiday."

"Bon Holiday...." At Shimizu's groaning voice, Toshio let out a breath.

"I hate mincing words. Moreover because I do know you, Shimizu-san, I don't want to sugar coat it. The other day, when I visited, I'd taken a sample of Megumi-chan's blood. I sent that for analysis. The results haven't come in yet. It's because the lab is closed for Bon. Of course, it wasn't as if there were no ways I could have had it sooner, and it wasn't as if I couldn't have done the most basic level analysis myself. But all the same, I didn't think that there was a need to hurry, at least not at that point."

"Anemia can be caused by something wrong in the body. Even knowing there was that possibility?"

"I'll acknowledge that it's a possibility but in Megumi-chan's case, I couldn't think that was the case. ---I couldn't think of it as anything but ordinary anemia. Because I knew there was a possibility that wasn't the case, I sent the sample out for the lab. But, I didn't think there was a need to hurry the results. It was

because Megumi-chan's condition wasn't severe enough that I'd thought to hurry it. If there was a severe enough defect, there would definitely have been symptoms, and I mean ones other than anemia. If there had been other symptoms that resembled a serious illness, I wouldn't have even hurried the test results, I'd have called for an ambulance and had her taken to the National Hospital. But, it wasn't like that. It looked like simple anemia, and even if it wasn't simple anemia, it looked like there was time to look at the test results, to re-examine her, and to find the exact cause."

"Then, why did Megumi die?"

"Even to me her death is a fluke. If I tried to predict the cause of death here and now, I'd have to say it was simple anemia, which I can't say. ---The truth is, I'm the one who's the most shocked."

When he had examined her the other day, indeed he hadn't really seen any particular symptoms beyond anemia. Nor did she have any particular medical history of such. Megumi was the type of girl who would make a fuss over the most trivial symptoms, and furthermore had a tendency to fake sick. She'd say this or that was hurting but no matter how many times she came for examination, no actual cause was found. ---Or, did that become a forgone conclusion?

Toshio had been wondering to himself when analyzing Megumi's body. Was there the possibility that he already decided for himself, and because of that, overlooked signs of something more serious?

(I can't say there's not...)

Reluctant as he was, he couldn't not acknowledge that. In truth, when Toshio had come to do the examination, he was surprised to see that Megumi even had anemia. After the fuss over her disappearance, when he'd heard that Megumi didn't seem well, Toshio's first thought was that she was faking sick. When thinking about what an incident it had become, Megumi, who had caused the fuss, it was indeed true that he'd thought she was faking feeling bad out of fear of being scolded by the Shimizus.

Looking at Megumi from the outside, there weren't any injuries or anything out of place. Her body temperature had dropped, and rigor mortis was setting

in. There was some light postmortem lividity, and her corneas were beginning to go opaque. But, there was no doubt that she was dead, and furthermore that a few hours had passed since she had died.

"Late at night---or, more precise, this morning, I think. From one to three in the morning." Toshio murmured, turning back to Shimizu. "What should we do?"

"What---do you mean?"

"I don't know the precise cause of death. And it's been over twenty four hours since I'd last examined her. If I may, I'd like to recommend a medical autopsy. At the least, I'd like to take a blood sample and perform a bone marrow aspiration, but I need Shimizu-san's permission."

"That's not funny!" Shimizu's face went crimson as he shouted, and then, surprised by the anger in his own voice, he lowered his face. "---No, I'm sorry."

"You want to hit me, I understand that, Shimizu-san."

"No.... I don't have any excuse. That isn't what I meant. But, an autopsy is no good. She's just a little girl. Even if we knew the cause of death, Megumi won't come back. ...Please, just spare her."

The way he's able to control himself is amazing, Toshio thought. He probably wanted to wring Toshio's neck and shout at him. Knowing Shimizu's personality, if it could explain what happened, he might have agreed to letting him take what he needed. But, he was hesitant to stimulate any emotion which might elicit further shameful behavior from Shimizu.

(Or maybe it's that I want a way out of this.)

Simple anemia, he'd said. To be sure, that was a mistake. And there was the possibility that it wasn't an inevitable mistake, but one based on his preconceived assumptions. Megumi's corpse was irrevocable evidence of that.

"Then, shall we say the time of death is 2:00 AM, and that the cause of death is acute heart failure?"

To Toshio's question, Shimizu nodded.

Part 2

"Shimizu, Megumi-chan?"

Seishin stared long and hard at the face of Mitsuo who had just hung up the phone. He had no words to follow up with, but Tsurumi voiced them in his stead.

"That's the daughter, then. ---You don't mean the old man?"

Looking a bit blanked out, Mitsuo nodded. "The daughter, they said. The highschooler," Mitsuo said, breathing a sigh of unclear meaning. "You know, from the mountain hunt before Bon. When they said the Shimizu's daughter didn't come home. Ever since she was found from that, it sounds like she'd been bedridden. And then this morning, it was all too sudden."

"She died?" Ikebe asked, just to confirm.

"Another one?"

Ikebe's spoke as a proxy the sentiments of those gathered in the temple office. Gotouda Shuuji's death came right after the three in Yamairi had died, and now even a young girl. With the three in Yamairi getting on in years, the only thing inconceivable about their ends were the circumstances. Shuuji was young, yes, but even if sudden death wasn't common for men Shuuji's age, it wasn't something rare either. ---But, Megumi was too young. She wasn't even yet an adult.

"Good grief...." Tsurumi breathed, sitting down into a chair. "Shimizu-san's family must be in shock. It will be hard for them to meet the griever. They'll be highschool students, after all."

"I feel sorry for her, herself. She was just getting to the best season of her life, yeah?"

Yes, it was Ikebe who said something unusually mature.

"You said it. What is going on this summer, I wonder?"

Seishin nodded to Tsurumi's words. Turning his eye to the window, the vapor

of the heat was flowing in with the sun light. Really, what was going on this summer? ---This intensely hot summer.

Megumi died, Kaori murmured. Even saying it out loud, it didn't feel any more real at all.

Megumi died. She had been told this. But, if she took Love out for a walk, couldn't she still run into her at the bottom of the slope? And when the new school semester started, every morning she'd meet with her.

(I can't see her anymore.)

She knew that logically but Kaori couldn't believe the lack of Megumi. She wouldn't ever see her again or have a conversation with her again. Why would something like that ever have to happen? Girls Kaori's age had misfortunes and died. But, those cases were somethings that happened in the news or in gossip, something that was printed in the papers, something that shouldn't have ever been there at Kaori's side. Right, such a thing would happen to manga or drama characters, but it wasn't a fate that should have ever come to visit Kaori.

Urged by her mother to get ready before going out, she went through the motions in a daze. She knew that something big had happened. And that it was something related to Megumi, she knew, too. Put in concrete terms, it was "Megumi's death" that happened to her, but still, after all, that hadn't quite hit her in the gut yet.

She had the strange rising sensation that she needed to hurry. Like she had some kind of event she had to take part in. And yet, when she looked at her mother taking out her flower print apron and putting it into her bag, something in her chest felt hazy, distraught. ---As if thinking it weird that she'd need to take out a flower print apron like that.

And all the same, what was weird was Kaori herself. Of course her mother was going to help with the service at Megumi's house. Because she was close with Megumi's mother. She had to go to work with the women of the Mourning Crew. It was all too natural that she would need an apron for that.

As her mother told her, she walked the street she had become used to walking in her house clothes. A heat haze was already rising off of the asphalt. Two days ago she was walking the street just like this. Now, what was different

from two days ago was that she was bearing Juzu prayer beads.

The entryway to Megumi's house was left open. Countless people were coming and going. Kaori likewise in her everyday clothes, and her mother with her worn out handbag, stepped onto the hard packed floor of the entryway and lowered their heads to Megumi's mother.

O n t h i s s a d o c c a s s i o n , w e g r i e v e w i t h y o u . M y c o n d o l e n c e s .

In a daze listening to that mysterious incantation, prompted by her mother, Kaori lowered her head as usual. Shimizu Horoko said to please go to see Megumi. Of course, Kaori had intended to. When she turned towards the stairway to the second story, her mother called to stop her. Hiroko and Kaori's mother turned her towards the first story tatami room where, for some reason or other, Megumi was laid out. Having the family altar so close to her was bad luck, Kaori found herself thinking.

(I'm strange...)

Kaori knelt down beside Megumi's futon.

(Megumi is strange, too...)

Why, when it was this hot, was she so wrapped up and covered in her futon? In the first place, this wasn't Megumi's room. If she went back to her room, she had a bed. And furthermore, this Megumi was like nothing but a shell of her.

(Where did Megumi go to, I wonder?)

As Kaori thought this, her mother and Hiroko were talking about something while crying, and she gazed at Megumi's husk. The Juzu beads she gripped were a strange sensation in her hands.

As she thought as much, her mother urged her on again. You can go on home now, she was told, to which she nodded her head. She didn't understand what she had come here for. So, alone, she turned towards the entry way before suddenly realizing she was facing the second story stairway. There was nobody in Megumi's room.

The room was very well cleaned. The bed was made, too. Kaori looked around

the room. The shelves and the top of her desk were both well organized. Her textbooks, notebooks, stationary still in the packaging. In surveying this, Kaori thought of the meaning of Megumi being in the tatami room rather than this one.

(.....Megumi.)

Something rose up in her throat. Yet, no matter what, it wouldn't rise further. Nor could she swallow it back down past it; it was painful.

Kaori ended up idly looking beneath the desk mat. The transparent deskmat was atop a calendar depicting kittens. And beneath that. That was Megumi's secret place. Memos or letters and the like she didn't want her parents to see were tucked in there.

Beneath the calendar she found a postcard. It was a postcard with a cute penguin picture.

A formal greeting in the heat of summer.

The formally written letters each had a thin blue border to them. With a glaze drawn here and there, they gave off the feeling of letters coated in ice. Below that was also a neatly written personal message. She had the feeling it had been rewritten several times.

It really is too hot out isn't it!

When school starts, it's really going to be a pain...

Anyway, please be safe in the heat!

Looking at the other side, Kaori smiled. At the same time, tears overflowed.

Yuuki Natsuno-sama

(Oh, Megumi...)

**(Even though I meant for this to be a midsummer greeting,
after writing it over and over,
it's now the season for a late summer greeting card.**

Am I an dummy or what?)

"Oh, Megumi... You really are a dummy....."

Once again Kaori turned the post card over. There was the cleanly written letters and the small colorful marker drawings.

"Working so hard to write this... if you don't send it, there's no meaning, you know..."

Over and over she rewrote it. To make it look as pretty as it could. Her overflowing tears fell above the postcard. Hurriedly, Kaori wiped it with the edge of her T-shirt. The marker smeared just a little.

"---Megumi."

There was no doubt she'd thought about the post card since summer break started. She went about to various stationary stores, looking for the postcard she liked most, then wasting how many of them? What to write, she fretted, as the days past. When she'd finally written it, she couldn't rouse the courage to send it and it turned to late summer, and she had to write it again. ---In the end, it still went unsent.

"Even though if you'd told me, I'd have sent it for you..."

While wavering about sending it, her health grew worse and she really couldn't send it. And then, at last----.

Kaori quietly returned her postcard to where it was hidden. She put the desk mat back in place, then collapsed into tears. At last, the hot, thick lump in her throat broke.

"This can't be..."

When Hirosawa opened the door to creole with Yuuki, Hasegawa gave a cough as if beckoning them over. It was early afternoon, the day of Bon. There were no signs of customers. Only Tashiro was seated at the counter.

"Good afternoon. Business is slow, I see."

Hearing Hirosawa's words, Hasegawa leaned forward. "Hasegawa-san, there was a death. At Shimizu-san's place."

Eh, Hirosawa blinked, as if being presented with something dubious.

"A death, who?"

"Megumi-chan. In the middle of the night. Ever since that, she'd been bedridden, it seems. That took a sudden turn, and by morning, she was

already..."

"That can't be..." Hirosawa murmured. 'Since that' must have meant when Megumi went missing. To be honest, when they found her, Megumi's condition had been strange. "Just what in the world..."

"It sounds like even the Junior Doctor really doesn't know. Just that, since it was very sudden, it might have been a sickness with some relation to leukemia, he said. --Or rather, the young madame of the hospital had come by, and she had said that. She came back for Obon. She said the Junior Doctor had said that. I see, said Hirosawa taking a seat at the counter. "That's, Shimizu-san must be heart broken. ...I'm at a loss."

Hasegawa nodded, indeed, as he put the siphon into the flame. "Come to think of it, doesn't the boy from Yuuki-san's house go to the same school as Megumi-chan?"

Yes, Yuuki nodded. "It seems like they're in the same class."

First year high school students. Natsuno had yet to turn sixteen but he wasn't sure about Megumi. Either way, it was far too young.

"It's terrible, isn't it," Hasegawa said again shaking his head. "The unpleasanties continue."

Really, Hirosawa and Tashiro agreed.

"What is going on this year. So little rain, and the days continue on insufferably hot..."

Hirosawa nodded and looked to Yuuki.

"Yuuki-san, what will you do about the service?"

"Ah---that's right. Even though I haven't known Shimizu-san long, I can't say we're complete strangers."

"I don't think it is something that you need to force, though. I have a connection to Shimizu-san, having been Megumi-chan's homeroom teacher during middle school, so I will be going, myself."

"No, I'll also be going. My son is her classmate, after all. There was also the incidents from before. ---But, I don't know what to say to comfort him."

"What?" Hirosawa said, preparing the coffee as he spoke. "At times like these, people are just happy that there are people who are thinking about them."

In front of Takemura, in the languid air of the early afternoon, the usual old people gathered about.

"Dead, you say? Who is?" Oitarou and Takeko asked, Ohtsuka Yaeko answering.

"Shimizu's daughter! Tokurou-san's place's Megumi-chan."

Ah, nodded Hirosawa Takeko. "The little show-off, that one?"

"That's right," Yaeko said, her voice low. "Didn't that girl go missing before Bon?"

Oitarou nodded several times. "Right, right, on the eleventh. I saw a big bunch of lights in the western mountains, I did; wondered what happened and wouldn't you know the next day when I asked they said there was a mountain hunt."

"Yes!" Ohkawa Liquor Shop's Namie's voice added in. "Even by nightfall she hadn't come back. And that turned into a big fuss. My Tomio's a member of the fire brigade, so he was recruited for the mountain hunt. In the end she was found unconscious in the western mountains."

Yaeko gave an exaggerated nod. "Since then I hear she's been in bad shape. That last night, while her parents were sleeping, she died!"

"Well dear me."

As Tatsu was half way listening, she realized it had happened again.

A girl died at night. As for the night of the mountain combings, Tatsu didn't know about it until it was all finished. On the day of the welcoming fires, the new move-ins had appeared here and there giving their greetings to the village they said but Tatsu didn't even see that.

(Everything's happening at night now, isn't it.)

It was always during a time when things wouldn't reach Tatsu's eyes.

"That's why I told you, didn't I?" From far back on the seat, Ikumi wore a meaningful smile. "That nothing good would come of this summer. As expected, people are dying. I told you so."

"Died? Who?" Yano Kanami's hand stopped with surprise, looking at the face of her mother who had come rushing into the shop.

"Like I said, Tokurou-san's place's grand daughter. At the Shimizu place."

"Shimizu...." Kanami tilted her head, then cried out. "You can't mean Megumi-chan from Hiroko-san's place?"

Letting her voice grow loud without thinking, Kanami quickly looked to Motoko washing the dishes at her side. She saw right away how Motoko's pallor had changed.

"Right, right, Megumi-chan!"

"Why did another one...?" Kanami asked the nodding Tae. Please, I'm begging you, don't let it have been a traffic accident, she prayed, ever aware of Motoko's presence at her side.

"I wonder? Before Bon she had gone missing and there was a mountain hunt for her, do you suppose she was injured? Aa... No, I have the feeling I heard somewhere she was sick, come to think of it."

"Which was it?"

"She was sick, yes. Yaeko-san said that she was bedridden."

"Oh.... the poor thing," Kanami said, though still feeling just a hint of relief. She heard Motoko give out the same small sigh.

"What'll you do?" Tae asked, leading Kanami to nod.

"I'll go to pay my respects. I'm in a bind, though, what can I say to comfort Hiroko-san, I wonder?"

Part 3

As sunset neared the evil spirits again grew boisterous. They who came to the side of he who continued to walk and wander the wastelands hurled abuses and stones alike. Even as one who wandered these lands, a sinner indeed was he, one who had broken the commandments.

---Outcast.

The spirits of the dead scorned him and threw stones.

Indeed, he had been cast out from his hometown on the hill. But, the evil spirits who drifted the wasteland thusly too should have been cursed existences like himself, should have been those created by God, driven out of his order.

Aren't you all outcasts, too!

At his angry voice the evil spirits cackled.

We are not outcasts.

We are not murderers.

Those in this land are without sin, without judgment.

It is that within your heart, the lingering sentiments, the firmly rooted delusions, the hatred, that uncouthly fastens you to your relations.

He was silenced.

He lost his hometown, he had lost the divine protection of God, and he had lost his little brother. The triple penance was without a doubt the reward for the sin he himself had committed.

---Thou art cursed.

Even without receiving the hex of the evil spirits, he was already cursed. Come the night, this curse took the form of his little brother to pay him a visit. Just being there at his side, without laying blame on him, or rather the grotesque figure making no move to injure him at all, serving as neither reprimand nor punishment, could not be called anything other than a curse.

That the little brother called upon him in this wasteland may have been the will of his little brother himself, or it may have been the will of God. If by chance it were the little brother's own will, what, then, was his motive? Revenge, denunciation, blame; any action that would support any conjecture he could make went undone by this Shiki. Vacant eyes only stared intently at him, following him without a word. Perhaps there was meaning in asking the Shiki his intent but as he could not be sure of that, if there was any intent at all, what it was he could not begin to imagine.

Seishin threw down his pencil.

He was making steady progress down the squares of the paper but he didn't feel that he wanted to write any of what he should have writ. It felt like piling up building blocks without meaning. What was written over every square was the character for "emptiness" it felt.

No, Seishin thought. What was burying everything might have been the character for "falsehood."

This was not a curse driven by affection.

--But, however much "his" little brother was an avatar of love, could he really go without hating the sinner who slaughtered him?

He killed his little brother on impulse. To his little brother, the older brother's violence should have been impossible to predict. Their betrayal was sudden, an irrational occurrence. And yet all the more if the little brother felt sympathy for him there could be no doubt that his little brother bore a religious fanaticism to

that called love.

(No, that's not it.)

Of course his little brother had a specific meaning in that he was nothing more than a symbol. To start with, for Seishin there was never any reason to write people according to reality in a hypothetical, made-up story. If there were a comparison to reality, in reality people didn't have meanings.

Even while he consented to acknowledging as much, the uncomfortable feeling towards that figure, separated from reality, was caused by none other than the unrest that troubled Seishin over Shimizu Megumi's untimely death.

---Of course, people die. There was no escaping that. If a newborn infant could die, then young girls could die as well. To begin with the idea that a human lifespan should continue past that was nothing more than an illusion concluded on by wishful thinking. Life and death were two sides of the same object. It was unmistakably the same thing to say that something was alive as it was to say that something might die.

Regardless, Megumi's death was thought of as tragic. She had enough years to her age to have qualified as having lived life and yet, he couldn't escape the impression that that it was an injustice, that she was being deprived by something. The possibilities her life could have had, the future she had drawn out in her mind, the bitterness and sweetness she was to have met in reality. That those were her right taken away by death most unjust was a feeling he couldn't cast aside.

Death was an unfair phenomenon. ---If so, the death thrust upon "his" little brother should too have been unfair. All the more for it being an act of murder; it was an irrational, merciless violence beyond the solemnity of death itself. The moment Megumi slipped away into death, was she conscious of it? Was the little brother conscious of it? If conscious of it, what was thought of it?

He was struck by the abrupt feeling he should have known.

He timidly tried to turn his head but all that he could see was a red swirl. Until the residential advisor had come into the closed up bathroom, Seishin watched the water. The transparent water flowed over the white tile surface, a floating red haze within it. An uncertain amount of the viscous red liquid was there,

riding through the transparent and non-viscous water in slender cord like shapes, flowing. As it looked as if it would become undone, he watched in a daze as threads nearer and nearer to him dissolved into it. Maybe the reason Seishin hadn't been thinking of anything at that time was because it was something he had chosen himself, or possibility because he realized that doing this would not cause him to die. --Yes, at the very least, it wasn't unfair. At least, not towards himself.

Of course, according to the people around Seishin, even while evaded, it would have been an unjust phenomenon. He was put in a taxi, spent a night at the hospital and tried to return to the dorms just as his parents had arrived. Like that, he was brought home, Mitsuo and Tsurumi---and even those like Tokujirou whose connections to the temple were deep interviewed him. All of them asked why. All of them seemed as if, more than anything, they had suffered the shock of such an unjust and unreasonable something thrust upon them.

Why, the sage inquired.

Seishin could not answer. That was because he did not have an answer, yet by them, in their own way, Seishin's

Sentiments of the heart were given consideration and allowance, were processed and quietly digested in their hearts. The neighbors no longer asked why. Instead they treated the slaughterer who had snatched away their lovable brethren unjustly with gazes steeped in compassion and sorrow,

Sehsin came to his senses and breathed a self-derisive sigh. Through the window came the night air and the sounds of the insects. Seishin folded up the writing paper and put it into the trashcan before leaving the temple office.

The village he overlooked from the grounds was dark. As expected there were no longer any remnants of the lights from the Bon dance. The dead that had returned for a handful of moments, and the living who welcomed them were asleep. ---No, there should have been at least one house that was not asleep. Among the sparse lights he could see, one was the light of a window of that unfortunate household, and within that window, surrounding the young girl's remains, they had one final night to spend with their daughter. The lights lit for the gods and the incense set for her not yet put out was the family's final

protection of her.

Thinking of Shimizu and Hiroko's, and surely her grandfather Tokurou's, grief depressed him. It was unreasonable to be laying out the one who was supposed to have laid them out. Thinking such pessimistic, melancholy thoughts he entered the cemetery.

The cemetery, for Seishin, wasn't a strange place. It was where the dead slept but strange as it was he felt it was the same as his patron's own tatami sleeping rooms. Now there was nobody. ---Always, there was nobody. That was the sort of place it was.

Flashlight turned on, he cut across the cemetery walkway to the temple's northwest forest. The steep, chiseled slope faced downwards towards the Yasumori lumberyard but, with the night falling as it had, the slope appeared to run down towards nothing but a dark hole. Along the edge of the slope continued the foot-formed wood cutter's path. Overlooking the lumberyard was a road that detoured towards the western mountains.

He walked while shining a light at his feet. While endeavoring to think about "his" little brother's death, never the less his thoughts always slipped towards Megumi's death in spite of himself. He couldn't not think about all that Megumi had lost. That he couldn't separate himself from it may have been because her cause of death wasn't stated clearly. The day after Megumi's disappearance, she had received an examination by Toshio. Toshio diagnosed her with ordinary amnesia but three days later Megumi was dead. Shimizu Hiroko who told him as much seemed to blame Toshio, an intentional cold indifference hanging in the air when he had come as a condolence caller to the all night vigil.

Of course people made mistakes. He understood that Toshio wasn't almighty, that he made errors. Even if it wasn't a grave medical malpractice error, there were probably no end to the trivial mistakes he had piled up. Even knowing that much, he felt something lingering in his chest. It wasn't as if it was anything he felt towards Toshio. If nothing else, Seishin knew full well that Toshio was as earnest as one could possibly be regarding his own obligations, and on that point he had full faith. ---It was just, if somebody hadn't made some kind of mistake, couldn't Megumi's death have been avoided? Wasn't what lead to her death correctable? Megumi's death was such an irrational turn of events,

wasn't it something that shouldn't have happened? He couldn't escape such misgivings.

He walked on for a while, when suddenly the light fell upon emptiness in front of him. Through the cut of the firs, there was a peek at the starry skies. He had lost his sense of time, but he had walked for about fifteen minutes from the temple. Within the forest of firs, there was a random building. It was a desolate and dilapidated old building.

The mountains in this area were a part of the temple. As all of the firs in this area were former grave markers, they were not cut down. As there was no trimming or maintenance, the surroundings had the distinction of being a pure and natural forest. The small path Seishin had walked went forward on into the western mountains and crossed with the woodland path but as far as people who followed this path now a days, it was probably limited to just Seishin. This area which was a part of the temple was a mountain not to be entered by the villagers. Long ago, there were those who saw it thusly. A member of the Kirishiki family, renting this place from the temple, built up that separated building as his own. And there it remained.

Walking across the grass damp with evening dew, he walked up to the porch. The concrete porch was cracked, with summer grass growing out of those crevices. On the porch were two cylindrical pillars supporting the eaves of the roof but with one of the pillars in decline the roof drew an uneasy, warped curve.

As Seishin neared the porch, shining the flash light forward (at last before him) onto something white (a white, pail doll) and stopped.

"---You."

As she turned to face the flashlight, raising one radiant hand, the girl turned around.

"Muroi-san?"

Seishin thought to call out to Sunako but without knowing what suffix to append to her name, his words were swallowed down.

"Good evening," the young girl smiled. "Is Muroi-san also taking a stroll?"

"Aa---that's right but, you...."

Perhaps not noticing Seishin's bewilderment, Sunako looked up at the building.

"Is this an abandoned house? I wonder just where I've found myself."

Seishin walked closer towards the porch the girl was standing on.

"This is the temple grounds."

"Oh my, then, perhaps I have entered where I must not?"

"No. That's not really what I meant," Seishin murmured, his eyes somehow or another going towards his left hand. The bland wrist watch dial glowed. "You're taking a stroll at this hour?"

"It's as you see. ---Say, this strange building, what is it?" Sunako half asked while gesturing inside of the door all but rotting off. "It appears to be like a church, but it seems it is not."

Seishin couldn't answer that. He was too profoundly baffled.

"Your flashlight?"

"I came without one. The nights in the country certainly are dark, aren't they."

"Step aside." Seishin set foot on the porch Sunako was on and entered into the building. "I have another prepared, I'll lend it to you."

Oh my, said Sunako from the entrance peeking within. "Is this by chance Muroi-san's hideout? Perhaps this is most intrusive of me?"

"No," Seishin said succinctly, taking up a flash light he had set out on the bench near the entrance. He pushed the switch to assure it worked and presented it to Sunako. "---Here."

"Thank you," Seishin said, entering the building seeming nervous. Taking the flashlight, she shined it over the inside of the building there. The dust covered, lined up benches, and the long, narrow windows in the walls surrounding them as well as something that appeared to be an altar at the front were illuminated.

"This not---a church?"

"It's a church. A private one."

Seishin sat on a bench. Because Seishin had brushed away the dust countless times, for now the grains of wood could be seen. Above the upper right of the altar the night sky could be seen. One part of the roof had fallen in. Beneath it grew summer grass around a pile of debris, and the inside of the building had the smell of evening dew and was filled with the sounds of insects.

"That's a lie, isn't it? It's not a church, this place."

While shining the light here and there, she sat beside Seishin.

"You'll get dirty."

"I'm fine. --But, there is stained glass."

The long, narrow windows were indeed stained glass, All the same, not a one had anything from the scriptures depicted on them.

"Unsettling images."

To begin with the craftsmanship was crude, and on top of that they were broken here and there but it was clear what was depicted on the stained glass Sunako's light illuminated. Three men. The man in the middle had a katana raised in a samurai fashion, and before him knelt two peasant looking men looking upwards with their hands folded in prayer. Beside them were the depictions of cross sections husks of fallen, removed heads. The heads themselves couldn't be seen.

Seishin clutched at his wristwatch and sighed.

"It is a church. Though it's not a formal one. In the past, there was someone strange in this village. He sectioned off this land for himself and build a church."

"Hmm?" Sunako murmured, shining her light on another stained glass window. "A man covered in flames---Ah, no, this is what they call the dance of the straw coat, isn't it?"

Seishin nodded. "Right. He had for a time left the village, and where he was at he had frequently visited a church but he wasn't a formally baptized believer. He didn't have an interest in God. Likely---"

Sunako finished his words. She turned her head while illuminating a picture of a victim being attacked by a lion.

"He had an interested in martyrs. Yes?"

Seishin smiled. "Mm, I think he did. So, it might be better to call this a shrine to martyrs than a church. For him it was a sanctuary, but that isn't what is called a church."

"What a strange fellow you had here."

Mm, Seishin nodded, shining a light towards the altar. Even if it was called an altar, it was just a platform with a few brass candlesticks set out. What Seishin was turning his light towards was the half crumbled interior of the sanctuary, to the left-hand side of the altar---illuminating what was within the sanctuary. That was a bed framed with the same brass as the candlesticks.

"He lived here?"

"Yes, he really was far removed."

"This wasn't someplace that believers gathered? Not where he carried on a, let's see, new aged religion?"

"I don't think it was like that. ---Though thinking that of him was what drove him out here. But, probably, he had never intended as much, I don't think. The benches are here as if he'd intended to have believers but it looks like he only thought of them as ordinary shelves. When I first found this place, clothing and every day tools and books were lined up on them, after all."

"Was he not well in the head?"

"That might have been the case. He was Kanemasa's---the one who lived where your house is. But they were called Kanemasa. Takemura was his real name. Kanemasa was a trade name."

"He was an ancestor of little old man Takemura?"

"It's not an old enough story to call him an ancestor. As I said before, this is a temple lot. He came saying that Takemura wanted to rent the land. It seems like it happened after the war. Takemura's son was a strange eccentric character, who he said wanted to separate himself off and live out here, so the story goes. As he was a man with many eccentricities, it seems my grandfather thought that it was surely his family who forced him to live separated."

"Ah," Sunako frowned as if with disdain. "A diplomatic form of house arrest."

"That's right. ---Or would be, but it wasn't like that. It was something he wished for himself. And then he built this. When those of the village saw it, they were surprised. No matter how you look at it from any angle, it's a church. Of course, there was no law against there being a church per-say, but---"

"This village was one overseen by the temple," Sunako smiled. "Was that it?"

Seishin smiled again.

"Right. The villagers were largely temple parishioners and such. This is surely a new branch of Christianity, and he had a mind to start it here, it seems they thought. That's why my grandfather and the villagers at the time were alarmed. At the end of a long push of whether he should return or not, Kanemasa forced him to come back to them. Still, it seems he had been living here for about three years. After that this place had fallen into ruins like this. That all happened during the war."

"Heeh...."

Seishi looked over Sunako who shined the light about with great interest. This was no hour for a girl of about thirteen to be out walking.

"Do you always go out walking at this time of night?"

Sunako turned back to look at him. She lightly shrugged her thin shoulders, her long hair spilling from her shoulders to her chest.

"It isn't as if I always do. At least, when we were at the prior house, I wasn't able to go out."

"A little girl shouldn't be walking around at night, they said?"

"But, ---I wonder if this is a rude way of putting it? Since we're so far in the country, I don't think there is much reason to worry. Especially if taking a stroll through the mountains."

"It's dangerous in the dark. There are wild dogs as well."

"I'd suffocate always staying in the house."

Seishin remembered what Tatsumi had said.

"You... aren't able to go out in the day time at all?"

"That's right, especially in fine weather. The sunlight is bad for me. If I soak in ultraviolet rays, it will quickly become bad for me. That's why even if I will remain peaceable about not going out to school, if I were also closed in at night, why, I could just fall into hysterics. I'd be more dangerous than a wild dog if I were to fall into hysteria, you know."

Seishin blinked. "You look rather healthy."

"When I am healthy. ---That's, I do have a doctor who oversees my health at my side, after all. There is a doctor in the home. But, I do sleep a lot. You could say half of my time is spent sleeping."

"I see..."

To a little girl who couldn't walk around in the day time, night might not be a time for sleeping so much as a time for taking in the fresh air. He knew that Sunako could also be seen as precocious. Surely inside of the home she really did pass the time often indulging in books.

Sunako sat there on the bench, her feet poking out from the skirt cuff swinging alternately. That was indeed childish, and when he thought that in spite of that aspect of her, she was braving an incurable disease, he realized his sense of compassion. It was the same compassion he had felt regarding Megumi.

"However, even if it's only half of the time, it's good you're well. Even if it's troublesome."

"It isn't something for Muroi-san to be depressed about."

"That isn't really what I meant. --Today, a young girl in the village died."

"...Dear."

"Though she was a little older than you. It was really sudden, too soon. Yes, this might be an irresponsible thing to say but if she were given another half a year, even bedridden, I think that she'd have wanted to live."

"Muroi-san, were you close to this person?"

"I wasn't particularly close with her, but the family is a part of the parish."

"How strange."

Seishin looked back at Sunako. Sunako tilted her head to the side, looking up at Seishin.

"If you were very close, I would understand why Muroi-san would become depressed. Or is it that how Muroi-san feels towards all of those in his parish?"

"No... I wonder. It's just that she was so young. She was still only in tenth grade."

"You're a romantic, aren't you. Or should I say sentimental?" Sunako said, standing up, brushing the dust from her skirt. "It's as if you think that a young person dying is especially terrible."

Seishin's eyes widened slightly.

"You don't think that it's a terrible thing?"

Sunako turned her head, With a certain determination, she looked at Seishin.

"Death is terrible for anyone. --Didn't you know that?"

Seishin was at a loss for words.

"It isn't related to whether you die young or take on many years and then die. The same for good and bad people. Death is equal. There's no such thing as an especially terrible or a not so terrible death. That is why death is so terrifying."

Death is equal, Seishin murmured.

"Whether young, whether old, regardless of their day to day life style, those things only have meaning while a person is alive. Age or individual personality are too irrelevant, your time will come, and when that happens, everything that defined that person and all that they stood for becomes meaningless, so any death is terrible. Am I wrong?"

Seishin nodded in agreement.

"I must return now. --Would you mind if I were to come here again?"

"I think that's your own choice. The mountain paths are dangerous at night, so I wouldn't recommend it, though."

"People are only free half of the time as it is, so I'm not of a mind to be stopped by a bit of danger. Do you come here often, Muroi-san?"

"Not enough to call it often, but."

"Oh? Then, next time, I'll bring a book with me. I wonder if you could sign it for me, if we meet again?"

Seishin smiled. "I don't mind."

Part 4

"Ah, Doctor." Toshio was coming out of the physiotherapy room past the reception desk when Mutou called to him from behind the counter. "What will you be doing in regards to the funeral for the Shimizus?"

Toshio made a faintly sullen face. "Ah... What time's it start, again?"

"It's eleven," answered Mutou who, like Toshio, had met with Shimizu several times at creole and wasn't distant enough to say he didn't know him.

"You're going then, Mutou-san?"

"I was hoping you would let me. It isn't like I don't know him at all. I passed on the over night vigil but, at least I should attend the service."

"Guess so," Toshio mumbled to himself. Toshio planned to go too. It was just, thinking back on the all night vigil, he became weary. Tokurou's reproachful eyes, Hiroko's implicitly critical manner of speaking, and then Shimizu Takeo's easily seen through manner of self restraint. He got that the Shimizu family blamed him. He didn't think it was unfounded but, still, closing down shop over someone you just didn't not know?

Toshio let out a breath; "Then, let's go in a little bit," he called out to Mutou. As Mutou nodded, the phone rang. Towada in the office picked up the receiver and after answering looked to Toshio.

"It's the Yasumori Sawmill," Towada said covering the receiver. "The Yasumori's Giichi-san seems strange, they say."

"Strange?" Toshio entered the receptionists office and took the receiver.

Yasumori Atsuko's voice came through.

"It's Giichi-san? What's the matter?"

Yasumori Giichi of the Yasumori Sawmill had been bedridden for a long time now with the grave illness of Parkinson's Disease. He was in his advanced years and in a condition where something happening at any time wouldn't be strange.

"He's not showing any signs of consciousness at all. If you talk to him he doesn't answer, his breath is shallow and slow. I think that his complexion has slowly been getting more and more of a dark red, but."

Maybe it was because Atsuko herself had spent many years as a nurse; her voice seemed used to delivering the state of affairs. That for two days he had a slight fever, that since this morning his blood pressure has been terribly low, that when putting an ear to his chest she heard rales, that a few days ago he had to have an aspiration treatment.

"I'll be right there."

Giving instructions to put him on an oxygen mask, Toshio hung up the phone. He gave a faintly wry smile to Mutou who had been watching him. To be honest, he had the feeling he'd just been saved.

"Sorry. Giichi-san's in bad shape. Sorry about this, but can I have you bring my condolence money for me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Give my regards to Shimizu-san."

Toshio crossed the road to the Yasumori Lumberyard diagonally across it, hurrying into the living quarters where Atsuko and her daughter-in-law Junko were waiting.

"How is he?"

"We put him on oxygen according to your instructions, but there's been no change," said Atsuko. Giichi had been ill a long time. The Maruyasu household had studied well, and in terms of frequent in-home care, they had prepared an ideal environment in terms of in home nursing but Giichi's condition slowly

deteriorated.

"Rales?"

"Wet crackling sounds. It looks like he's also had some incontinence, it's very similar to when he had pneumonia before."

Toshio headed down the hallway to the living room with a nod. Giichi had difficulty swallowing normally due to the Parkinson's disease. It was easy for aspiration to occur, and the family was aware of that and had thorough knowledge of respiration treatments but, if he had had aspiration a few days ago, he had suspicions of aspiration pneumonia.

Entering the living room that had become a sickroom, Toshio nodded at Giichi's form. The beginning stages of cyanosis were occurring. The oxygen was having no effect. Likely acute respiratory failure due to pneumonia.

Toshio performed a brief examination as he instructed Atsuko to call an ambulance. Her daughter-in-law Junko rushed to the phone in the sickroom. Toshio becked Atsuko into the hallway.

"Just like you said, Atsuko-san, it's probably pneumonia. We can take an X-ray to be sure of the exact disease responsible but before that we should perform artificial respiration. He may need a tracheotomy."

Atsuko nodded with a stiff expression. Considering the look on her face that seemed to want to ask him something, Toshio nodded.

"Now that his disease has progressed, his physical strength has declined. It might be better to prepare yourselves for the worst, this time."

Yes sir, Atsuko nodded.

Part 5

"Kaori, you have your juzu beads, yes?"

"...Mm."

Kaori nodded while thinking again and again inside of her head that it was

Megumi's funeral. She couldn't believe it. Wasn't a funeral always supposed to be something for old people? It had no relation to Kaori. A funeral was something her mother and father went to while Kaori watched the house. Yet Kaori had to go. Her mother who had helped from beginning to end had left the house. There was help to be given at the funeral.

Kaori saw her leave and watched TV with Akira. She was with Akira sitting in the living room but none of the contents of the program made it into her thoughts. Watching an ordinary program felt terrible strange. Somehow it all felt so inappropriate. The images, the sounds, they all slid over her consciousness without taking hold.

"Hey, Kaori."

At Akira's voice, Kaori gave a half-hearted response.

"It's kinda weird, huh?"

"What is?"

"Three people died in one swoop in Yamairi, right? That was just a little while ago. Then on top of that this time it's Megumi. ---Megumi was pretty healthy until just recently wasn't she? Then, all of a sudden, like."

"That's right."

"Even though nothing happened, just dying out of the blue like that, yeah? Three people. Megumi too, huh? I'd get it if something happened, if she'd been hospitalized for a while, but..."

Kaori turned her gaze to Akira's extremely solemn profile. "...But the truth is, nothing happened."

"That's true but," Akira said still looking at the TV. "It's kind of strange."

Kaori didn't reply. She couldn't turn it aside saying these kind of things happened. Kaori was certain that was something that she would never be able to do with this. Like someone could just suddenly cease to be there anymore like this. And of course, if she couldn't do that, then that the same programs as usual could be broadcast, that she could be sitting with her little brother like this in the tea room, that somewhere someone was having a similar all night

vigil and a funeral---like it was nothing at all, like nothing special or important happened, that it could all be handled thusly absolutely was a mistake.

But because Kaori couldn't express that well, she settled for quietly nodding. Something was, strange.

While she thought, the program ended and she stood.

"...I'll be back."

Kaori pushed the wrinkles out of her uniform, took a small pouch with her and left the house. She was sure come September she would hate to wear this uniform again.

Heading out, today's weather was sunny. The gaping blue skies, the bright white lights. The reflection off of the asphalt was blinding. She narrowed her eyes against it, trudgingly walking along. The road she was used to taking every morning. The way she had walked many, many times to invite Megumi. Yet, as she neared the specific house, it was as unfamiliar as an unknown house. The flower wreathes and the black and white walls. The tent beside the gateposts, the people gathered in the street. Those people too were all in black and white.

That was why the one a little ahead in grey pants stood out so terribly. He was standing amidst black and white. A white shirt and grey uniform pants, a tall and thin figure. Right next to him was a girl in a white and light blue uniform, so all the more he stood out.

(He came to the funeral for you...)

It was just a little, but she felt happiness. A white shirt well starched, clean creased pants. Even if it was the same uniform, it looked different on him somehow. Do all boys from the city have that air about them, she wondered. Right beside him stood a boy in a black and white outfit. Even though he and that boy had a similar hairstyle, something about it looked different. What was different or how, Kaori didn't know.

(Aren't you glad, Megumi?)

She whispered in her heart, and until a housewife from the neighborhood urged her to enter, Kaori continued to gaze at him.

Megumi remembered the late summer greeting card when the incense was being burned. The sutras were still being chanted but most of the condolence callers gathered in the tatami room stepped outside once the incense was burned. Kaori slipped through the waves of people who had left the room, towards the entryway. In the entrance way, right at the stairway was a black and white curtain blocking the way. Right in front of that was a desk with gifts of gratitude for attendance piled up; it wasn't a situation in which she could easily go upstairs.

(What should I do?)

Hurriedly leaving the entryway, those who would be in the funeral procession were loitering out front. Seen split off a ways from that was Natsuno, talking to a girl next to him. It was a face she had seen a few mornings. She had seen her talking to Natsuno several times, too. If she remembered right, she was a girl from his neighborhood, right? Mutou Aoi she was called, she believed. She remembered Megumi saying, as if relieved, that she was two grades above Natsuno.

(What should I do...)

Once again, Kaori turned towards the entryway. The black and white curtain, the people in black and white forming a line there. If she tried to give it to him another day, then Kaori didn't have more than a scrap of a vague idea where his house was.

Kaori sucked in a small breath and worked her way through the crowds of people towards Natsuno.

"Uhm... You're Yuuki-san, aren't you?"

Being meekly called out to, Natsuno lightly furrowed his brows. "And?" A curt voice answered.

"I am Tanaka Kaori. I am Megumi's childhood friend."

"Hnn."

Kaori was aware herself of her voice becoming higher pitched. "Uhm, I am sorry. There is something that I would like to deliver to you no matter what.

Tomorrow, may I have you please meet with me someplace?"

The young man besides him poked at Natsuno.

"Natsuno, you sly dog, you."

"What?" After glaring at the young man, he looked to Kaori. "What do you want to deliver to me?"

"Uhm,That's. It isn't me so much as Megumi.... It is from Megumi."

"What's the point of that?" Natsuno made a sharp eyed expression. "I only came because our parents know each other, I'm not exactly close with Shimizu. I don't have any reason to accept anything from her."

"But...."

As if he didn't hear what Kaori was saying at him, Natsuno turned back to the young man at his side.

"Let's go, Tohru-chan. It's hot here."

"But, the procession?"

The young man seemed to be looking back and forth between Natsuno and Kaori but Natsuno was less hospitable.

"It's fine isn't it, even if we don't stay just to watch. I don't have any obligation to stand in for the burial, and with no shade around just don't want to." Saying such carelessly, Natsuno prodded the young man. He smiled as if he had forgotten Kaori. "You're gonna treat me to shaved ice, right?"

"Natsuno, you sure about that?"

Tamotsu asked looking behind them, as Natsuno glared at him. Tamotsu held up both hands.

"Sorry. YuukiKoide. ---Who was that?"

"Like I know?"

"You sure about that, being so cold with her. She wanted to deliver it, isn't that an article of the deceased?"

"I don't have any reason to accept it."

"Even if you don't have a reason, she does. That's why she bothered to stop you at all."

"But I hate Shimizu."

Aoi looked at Natsuno with shock. "Natsu, you're scum!"

"Leave me alone. She was always trying to get involved with me, it was just sad, man."

"You're going to speak that badly about a girl who's gone?"

"Even if you say that much, I really didn't even know her," Natsuno said looking to Aoi sulkily. "I didn't even really have a reason to attend the funeral, but dad kept pushing, go, go, and you guys were so noisy about me coming with you, so I just came along. I didn't even have enough of a connection to her for that, from the start."

"But, delivering an article of the dead would mean it's a distribution of mementos. It's just polite to say thanks and accept it."

"I refuse. Accepting a memento of someone you don't even know that well just feels wrong doesn't it?"

Tamotsu gave an exaggerated shrug. "You really do just do whatever you feel like, huh?"

"Then, if it was Tamocchan, you'd take it?"

"If it's just accepting it I could at least do that much. But I might throw it away later."

"Which one of us is scum, huh?"

Tohru sighed. "You two really are bratty kids, huh?"

"What's that?" the two asked threateningly, earning a forced smile from Tohru.

"Well, it's fine. Let's go grab a shaved ice. It's definitely unbearably hot."

Part 6

Biting her lip, Kaori went up the mountain path.

When she raised her eyes to the front of the line, the coffin with a white cloth draped over it was solemnly going up the hill. The shadows falling from the tips of the firs were a gloomy blue, and in exchange for a break in the mid summer heat wave, the mountain path whose wild underbrush was mowed away at the last moment left the densely lingering smell of dirt and grass.

---Megumi was being sucked away into the firs.

(Megumi...)

Kaori tightly gripped her juzu beads. It was too fast of a death. She must have had regrets, how many things undone were there? Thinking of that, Natsuno who had completely turned his back on her was loathsome. She had wanted to deliver it to him because it was filled with her feelings. Surely she must have desperately longed to send it. And yet.

(....Cruel.)

Even though Megumi was dead. Even though she was no longer here. Even though it was so pitiable, Natsuno didn't feel an ounce of it towards Megumi. --- And it wasn't just Natsuno.

Kaori turned a ear to the murmurings of the adults surrounding her who were climbing upwards. A sudden death, she was too young, poor Shimizu-san, what made her die so suddenly anyway, even though she was always so healthy. From there, the conversations slid. Someone from such and such lost their child, in a family someone else knew. Talk of people who had no connection to Megumi, and then talk of Yamairi. Idle gossip that hadn othing to do with death. And then suddenly, the topic returned back over to Megumi. In the first place, when nobody knew where she was before Bon, that time, what happened, anyway? And from there, whispers she couldn't bear to hear. There was no mistaking something happened. After all, she was such a capacious girl, they knew it'd come to this someday.

(It's cruel, isn't it... Megumi.)

Nobody was grieving Megumi's death. Even though Megumi ad died, she wasn't being treated as if she had.

The head of the procession halted. With her head hung in shame, biting her lip, Kaori didn't notice that, continuing forward ahead and bumping into a girl's back.

Between the trees was a long and narrow plot where the grass was mowed away, and there was opened in the dirt a deep black hole.

Kaori was suddenly stiff with dread and nerves. The hole that would swallow Megumi. Megumi would be put in there, buried, and vanish from this world. The forest of firs held countless graves, it had swallowed up this many dead already, and it would probably go on to swallow many more. And one day, Kaori's own turn would come.

(....One day?)

Megumi, too, no doubt thought "some day." But, it was already Megumi's turn. Nobody knew when it would be. In that case, even Kaori's turn could come. How could she state emphatically that it wouldn't be tomorrow?

Some day---possibly even tomorrow, it could be, the day after tomorrow, it really was coming some day, the day Kaori would be swallowed up in a hole and no longer be in this world.

(I'm scared...)

Just imagining it was terrifying, and then, when she thought about Megumi going off to that, desperation hit her. She couldn't avoid that, no matter what. Before the trembling Kaori's very eyes, the coffin was lowered down upon platforms like a ladder. The manager of the Mourning Crew rang a small bell and the Junior Monk from the temple began reciting the sutras. Minute by minute, hour by hour, the time when Megumi would be severed from this world drew nearer.

(Poor Megumi. ...Even though she was just 15.)

Yes, just fifteen. Megumi, born in August, was for a small time the same age as Kaori born in June. That's right, she thought. Megumi was the same age as Kaori. If Megumi died, then it wouldn't be strange for Kaori to die either. She would almost have been sixteen, Kaori thought, realizing it really would have been just a little further. Megumi's birthday was August 26th. There were no stylish articles to dress up with in the village, so Kaori rarely went out to the town of Mizobe. Recently, when brought along casually by her mother to do some shopping, she had bought a present for Megumi, she remembered. It was properly wrapped. She was supposed to give that to her and yet.

Kaori turned her head to look back. The Shimizu family graves were near the Sue no Yama mountain, not too deep in. From here it wasn't far to Kaori's

house. Why couldn't she have remembered earlier? They could have lowered it into the hole with her.

"Uhm... Ma'am." Kaori turned to look at Hiroko, who had been crying her eyes out. "I prepared a present for Megumi-chan. Would I be able to go back to get it? I want to put it into the grave with her."

Hiroko opened her eyes and gave a troubled look to the people around her. The men with the rope in hand lowering the coffin, too, exchange troubled glances.

"Even if you ask, now, it's, y'know."

"Now!" said a small voice, from Kaori's mother. "What is this all of a sudden. You're being a pest!"

One of the working men spoke as if to take back the sentiment. "No, I'm sure just the feelings alone would have made the deceased happy. I mean, whether it's really put in or not isn't what matters."

That's right, nodded several people, and Hiroko too gave a sad smile. "Thank you, Kaori-chan. But, the feeling is enough."

"...Yes, ma'am."

Kaori hung her head in shame. Nobody, nobody understood Kaori's feelings. Even though Megumi was dead. Even though Kaori lost Megumi.

"Uhm...." raised a quiet voice, that of the Junior Monk. "How about perhaps allowing her to go and bring it?"

Kaori raised her face. She was met with a mild and gentle smile.

"It will take time to place the dirt after all, could we not leave an opening at the front bedside portion? She is her friend, isn't she? In that case, I think that Megumi-chan would want us to do this, too, and if the young lady holds onto the present that she had gone through the trouble to prepare, there will be sentiments within her heart as well that will be difficult for her to bury."

Haa, said the working men. "If the Junior Monk's saying so, then..."

"Thank you very much." Kaori lowered her head. Realizing that her feelings were understood, she was truly happy. The young monk gave a peaceful nod.

"Be careful on your way."

Part 7

Natsuno returned to his room and stripped off his uniform throwing it recklessly aside. Succumbing to the hot air trapped in his room he opened the window. For an instant he moved to close the curtain as usual but, he soon remembered there was no need to so that.

---Right, there's no need to do that anymore.

Natsuno stared out the window into the firs looming close their backyard. There was only a low stone wall left as the barrier to the backyard. It was indeed an antiqued and mossed over the old stone wall, but it only came up to about Natsuno's calf. Still, it was a tentative boundary line. Within the wall were a dense thicket of growth. Looking at it from Natsuno's bedroom window, one had a full frontal view of it. The underbrush about half as tall as Natsuno were, according to his mother, raspberry plants.

(Megumi's dead.)

In those raspberries' shadows. Pressed up against the trunk of a fir, Natsuno knew that Megumi stood there time and time again. It started when the weather became less severe, it became incessant during spring break, then for a while there had been longer stretches but lately it had picked up again. From the bowers, she stared at the window. ---Natsuno did know, of course, what that meant.

Megumi was always like that, Natsuno thought. Visiting the house of her one-sided love, secretly peeping through the window. That was probably, as seen by Megumi herself, a brave and lovable thing to do. He was certain she was doing that to play the part of a maiden in love, enjoying the pain of one-sided feelings to its fullest. Maybe she even had expectations of it. Like that the one who found her standing there like that would be touched by Megumi's love and accept and return her feelings.

But, Natsuno would emphatically pass on that role. Megumi didn't get it. Megumi was caught up in her own little world, without a thought to spare to the likes of the other's mind in the matter. If that weren't the case, then she shouldn't have been able to fail to realize that of course Natsuno would be uncomfortable with her peeking into his house like this, invading his privacy.

Give me a break, he thought. Megumi had expectations of certain courtesies

from Natsuno. It was expected that today, he should grieve even the loss of that girl, should thankfully receive her articles. He was supposed to be touched by Megumi's sentiments, or maybe she'd have liked him to let a single tear slip out.

(....Like a school play.)

What Megumi expected Natsuno to be was her partner in what was nothing more than a high school romantic drama. What that girl expected of Natsuno was to take on the role of the one-sided love interest of the heroine who died young and tragically. That was the role that everybody was assigning to Natsuno. A boy from the big city who moved into the village set up as a foil to her, or possibly the one with emptiness in his heart from the harsh city life, the one who didn't notice her there. While thrusting these roles onto people, Natsuno was condemned to follow their script. No one---really, not a one---realized that it was just a self-centered scenario she had set up for herself.

"A real laugh."

Natsuno spit outwards into the raspberry fields.

Natsuno hated Megumi. He knew what Megumi expected. Those were expectations Megumi came up with on her own. But, Megumi was not aware that those were nothing more than self-important expectations. She wanted him to say this, to respond like this, while she didn't state that up front, she tried to direct the flow of conversation to make him say the expected lines, to take the expected actions.

--I'm not very sophisticated compared to those city girls, huh?

--Natsuno-kun, you hate me, don't you?

--You look like you're going to tell me not to even look at you again or something.

It was exploitation to get what he wasn't putting out. Natsuno was firmly set against having the role she wanted him to play thrust onto him, but in this village people not only threw themselves into those kind of exchanges, they didn't even realize they were being made to play a part, or worse still they thought it was a virtue, to play to their partner's expectations.

(It's a village wide circus act.)

Megumi cast Natsuno as her partner in her love story on her own. While doing as much, Megumi herself was only acting the part of a love story's heroine, in nothing more than a superficial dream. It wasn't something she longed for with any urgency. She was just playing a girl in love, immersed in her own self satisfaction. Megumi was the incredibly predictable, not remotely complex type.

But---Natsuno thought. Even that Megumi had one single thing that she would put on a serious face for, and that was when talking about the city. She said she hated the village, wanted to go out to the city. In that alone could he see a real drive in her, and on that alone did Natsuno sympathize.

Megumi was always saying she was going to a college in a city. To tell the truth, Natsuno didn't really believe it. While making a fuss that she was definitely going to go, Megumi didn't show any signs of actually preparing to do that. Saying she wanted to go here or there for school, when offering up names she had nothing but ones she'd just heard in passing, which were all good schools, and yet Megumi didn't care about her own grades. Natsuno wanted to leave the village too. To do that, he thought, he would go to a college in a city come hell or high water. That was why he was preparing for that. If he could at least just return to the city, he wouldn't be picky about the college or the department, he had even thought. Looking at it from that enduring Natsuno's perspective, he didn't think that Megumi's so called escape plan had much feasibility, and that while she might have said this and that, in the end Megumi would, just like it seemed had apparently happened with high school entrance exams, at the eleventh hour, find some reason like that her parents wouldn't permit it and betray herself. She'd be stopped up in the village while saying some day for sure, and doubtlessly take up root in the village.

He thought of Megumi as that kind of person but Natsuno did at least have the feeling that the sentiment of wanting to leave the village was sincere. And Megumi----died.

Megumi really did break out of Sotoba, through death. Or maybe it should have been said that death allowed her out of Sotoba, or that she wouldn't have broken out at all by any means other than death.

---Maybe the same went for him.

Part 8

The burial finished, the party returned to the Shimizu house, gathering in the tatami room for the meal. Seishin had done nothing more than perform the simple ceremony and thus was as usual hesitant about sitting at the guest of honor's seat at the head of the table.

Megumi's grandfather Shimizu Tokuro was once a central figure, having taken part in the village Diet. In his youth he was vigorous and prosperous, with an abundance of anecdotes to tell. Shimizu Takeo, his son, too, was an extraordinarily upright man. The hot blooded and easily excited Tokuro and the cool and theoretical Shimizu, were mirror opposites yet with a thread of commonality between them, so Seishin had thought for a long time. But, those two were seated as if beaten down. If it was rare to see Tokuro so worn down as to not express his emotions, then it was also rare for Shimizu to openly display his emotions without regard for who was watching.

Hiroko was both, yet neither. When you thought that the damn would break and she would wail and cry, she sat like an expressionless doll. When you thought that the comforting words from around her were earning a look on her face as if finding some peace, she would talk of her own grief, and in doing that like the lid was off the barrel of her emotions, her voice rung out with sobs. She would cry for a while when her eyes would raise like cloudy glass orbs, and as if a spring was cut fell into lethargic despondency.

The three seemed as if they hadn't come back to themselves. They most likely must have felt that a part of them was deserted in the mountains. Seishin again had no words for the situation. Seeing them like this, he knew the words "Do not be too broken spirited" would hold no meaning. Megumi was too young. It was probably impossible not to be broken spirited.

Tokuro who always looked ten years younger than he was, today seemed more aged than his years, and the same to Hiroko. Her back rounded as she slouched forward with her head hung, mysteriously overlapped with that of

Gotouda Fuki in his mind.

(...It would be best to be prepared.)

The words suddenly came to mind. ---Yes, it would be best to be prepared. Accept Megumi's death, and prepare to stand again from that even a moment sooner. You can't be discouraged. You must not dwell in this grief.

(But, how can I say something like that to all of these people here now?)

Seishin turned his eyes to Hiroko, with her open sobs. At times acting like the Shimizu he remembered, his hand would go to Tokurou's back, as if protecting his aged father, but at the same time it seemed as if he were clinging to his father, earnestly trying to keep himself in check. That was heart breaking, and at the same time something about it looked dangerous.

These people were all past their limits in bearing the shock of Megumi's death. Right now, their hands were full with that, and to want anything more of them was cruelty. None the less, Seishin couldn't help but want to pat each and everyone one of them on the back and say that they musn't be brought down. The thing was that Seishin himself didn't know why he felt such an impatient unease. But.

(It would be no good to do it like that.)

He had to stop the crying, quickly.

---When children cry the oni come.

Chapter 8 Translation Notes

General

Juzu -

Prayer Beads used in Japanese Buddhism, their use is similar to a Catholic rosary with beads meant to keep track of counting the sutras while they are chanted. There is also the belief that the good karma leaking off from the chanting of sutras may reside in the juzu. Sutras are typically chanted 108 times as there are believed to be 108 attachments or afflictions that plague man. If

more than 108 are to be chanted, some sects start going backwards around the ring of beads to signify breaking the cycle of death and rebirth. The shapes vary between sects as do the appropriate ways of holding them when in use. The formal, larger ones with 108 beads are typically two-ringed, with or without two to four smaller beads dispersed between them. Informal ones may have fewer than 108, are a single ring, and have between 18 and 45 beads usually in some number that divides evenly into 108. Men's informal juzu tend to have larger but fewer beads, women more but smaller. The tassels also come in forms ranging from loose to braided to balled; the tassel style is largely a matter of taste. The appropriate way to hold them between the hands, over one hand, over both, beneath the thumbs, *etc.* varies by sect.

Examples of

[men](#)

and

[women's](#)

informal juzu from

<http://www.butsudanya.co.jp>.

[Examples](#)

of holding/use styles by sect from Echo Sekizai.

Chapter 8 - 2

Megumi refers to Natsuno with -sama in her postcard. In formal and very proper letter writing, it isn't uncommon to refer to recipient with -sama even if that would certainly never be used in interactions. This should not be mistaken for a fawning, empty-headed idol worship form of address.

Chapter 8 - 3

Dance of the Straw Coat - A form of torture that involved wrapping a person

in a straw coat, as was at times used as a rain coat in the feudal era, and lighting them on fire. It was a form of torture often used on Christians during their persecution in Japan.

Chapter 8 - 5

The flower wreathes and the black and white walls. -

Typical scenery at a Japanese funeral.

It's not unusual to have the service and all night vigil in the home, particularly in small areas with no funeral parlor or undertaker.

[Example](#)

of a typical all night vigil/funeral service for Zetsubou Sensei's titular character, in paper craft form. It includes the black and white funeral curtains hung to signify a funeral. Notice the lid is off on the coffin, but that the lid has an opening over the face, to open for those who wish to view it when the lid is in place.

[Source blog.](#)

Has more pictures including the hearse and reception.

Shaved Ice

- Popular summer treat similar to a snow cone, ground more finely to the consistency of soft snow and topped with condensed milk as well as the syrup.

[Example](#)

from Wikimedia Commons.

Chapter 9

Part 1

News of Yasumori Giichi's death reached the temple the day after Shimizu Megumi's funeral, when Bon came to a close. Seishin took the message, thinking, indeed it had come to this. The night before, he had received contact from both Toshio and the Maruyasu sawmill that he was in critical condition. Even before that, it was clear that Giichi, who had already been suffering for a long time now, didn't have long left.

With that perhaps as the reason, the voice of Kazunari from the Maruyasu sawmill, was exceedingly calm in relaying his death. During this Bon, all members of the family had gathered and were able to spend the holidays with Giichi, and they were glad for that, said Kazunari. While taking the message Seishin was composed enough to offer words of comfort about how Giichi was likely able to begin his journey satisfied with that.

"Kazunari-san is managing the sawmill splendidly, and Kazuya-kun has a fine wife. This may be rude to say, but I think that Giichi-san was free of worries or regrets."

"That's right," Kazunari said into the receiver, seeming to be smiling. "We were unable to show him a great grandchild, so as far as disappointments go, there is indeed one. But still, having a good wife in the family, it seemed that father was pleased with that much."

"That may be so."

"The wife and my son's wife got along well with him, too. My old man struggled to the end trying not to be selfish with them."

"It's true," Seishin could nod, without any staging involved. Seishin was the same, caring for a patient who was, rather than having health that seesawed up and down, taking two steps back for every step forward. He understood well the emotions of those of the Maruyasu household. "You have truly worked

hard. Kazunari-san, and Giichi-san alike."

"Thank you," Kazunari said, his voice becoming tight.

"He's died, has he? Giichi-san," asked Mitsuo as Seishin hung up the phone.

"Yes. Just now, at the National Hospital. The Mourning crew's manager for Monzen is Tokujiro-san, who is a relative, so Tamo's Sadaichi-san will probably assume the role."

"Is that so," sighed Mitsuo. "Now that it's come to losing Giichi-san, Sumi-kun and his father and brother will have to help us, won't they?"

Seishin nodded. Yasumori Giichi, until he had passed it on to his younger brother Tokujirou, had served as the parish family representative. He had also helped as the leader of the temple helpers, making him an integral person to the temple. For a funeral for such a man, Seishin and an attendant monk would not suffice. As the acting head, he would need to have several others involved to serve the role of the assistants to the head priest. They would also have to seek consultation on determining his posthumous name with the honorary Ingou.

"This's gonna be hard," Ikebe sighed. "With that said, it'll be easier in a way than Megumi's, though."

Tsurumi's face furrowed. "You're saying such impudent things again."

"That's true," said Mitsuo turning to face the blackboard as he shook his head. "We shouldn't say it but now that you've said it, it certainly will be easier. Shuuji-san and Megumi-chan and the like, those funerals where the older ones are burying the younger ones, put a strain on us, too."

At Mitsuo's words, Seishin of course, everyone really, did let out a relieved breath. It was a peaceful death, Seishin thought. Of course, that didn't change what it meant to be dead but this felt how death was supposed to.

A reasonable death. An old man returning to the mountains. He was born as a human, spent his youth in the village, performed his work and built a family, and was then finished with his tasks. It was as if he could watch him from behind as he departed with a self-composed gait into the mountains. At last he was freed from his sickbed, from his suffering, and his family too released from

their fear and concern on his behalf. To Giichi perhaps it was a blessing. He went on not to know the tragedies to come.

In his heart, Seishin folded his hands, wondering about his own thoughts. What were "The tragedies to come?" What tragedies could have been in store for Giichi beyond this? Giichi was ill. His family nursed him fruitlessly, his condition worsening day by day, and he'd heard that in the end he couldn't even lift up from his pillow. The man's own agony must have been severe, and he must have had concerns about troubling those around him, and of course, he must have had uneasiness regarding his own impending death, without a doubt. Ending short any remaining years of being bound to the bed in ever increasing agony, when one thought about it, might have been a blessing indeed, but "he went on not to know the tragedies to come" was subtly a different sentiment than that.

Seishin considered his own thoughts and then found the unease within himself.

Shuuji's death was a tragedy. Megumi's death too was another tragedy. And it was just the start of a string of serial tragedies.

Death spread through the village as a disease, to bring on repeated tragedies to come. That was---his premonition.

Part 2

"Doctor, something from Tajima National Health Institute's arrived, were you waiting on something?"

At Towada's voice, Toshio looked up from the document he was reading. It was the written report on Giichi's death from somebody he knew at the National hospital. As expected Giichi had pneumonia. The cause of death was gram positive cocci, and arrhythmia caused by heart failure.

"It's come? Sorry, but could you fish out just Megumi-chan's results for me?"

"Megumi---Shimizu-chan, you mean?"

"Right," Toshio said, as Towada nodded knowledgeably and turned back. Soon there was the sound of someone hurrying, and Mutou rather than Towada

came back with a single sheet of paper.

"Sorry about that, Mutou-san."

Toshio took the test results and looked to the main entries. Her total red blood cell count, white blood cell count, and platelet count were down, and her hemoglobin concentration and hematocrit were reduced as well. In contrast, her reticulocyte count was high, and her serum iron levels, TIBC, and serum ferritin levels were normal.

Toshio's brows furrowed. ---These were not happy results.

"How is it?"

Being spoken to, Toshio finally realized that Mutou was still standing in front of his desk, trying to peek, himself. He felt like telling him to let it go but Mutou was close to Shimizu. Never mind that Toshio was the one to say it was anemia, Megumi did suddenly die. Regardless of the difference in degree of sentiment, Mutou may have been the same in feeling some kind of guilt or something towards Shimizu.

"Ah--- yeah."

"Anemia after all?"

Toshio took a breath. "There was anemia. But, while it was anemia---it wasn't iron deficiency anemia. I misdiagnosed."

That can't be! Mutou made a grievous face.

"Serum iron levels, TBIC and serum ferritin, all of them are entirely within the normal range. If it were iron deficiency anemia, then their levels not being low is strange."

"But the results only came back today," Mutou said, dismayed. "That's right, that's, you shouldn't, you couldn't have made an accurate diagnosis until the results came in, you aren't a fortune teller after all. The reason the results came back late was because it was the Bon holiday----"

"It's nothing for you to get that worked up over," Toshio said with a strained smile. "Anemia is usually iron deficiency anemia. Especially since she was a young girl, any doctor would suspect that first. Certainly saying that there was

nothing to worry about without due consideration was my mistake, but," the inside of his mouth was bitter but once he'd spit the words out and acknowledged it it felt better. "it might have been better to hurry the results. If I'd done that then at least the worst case scenario might've been avoided. ---- That's what I was thinking but somehow or another it looks like that's not how it was."

"Ha?"

Toshio took a calculator out from the desk drawer.

"Mean corpuscular volume, mean corpuscular hemoglobin concentration." He tried to calculate them roughly based off of the red blood cell count, hemoglobin concentration, and the hematocrit. "and the reticulocyte count are high. That'd mean normocytic normochromic anemia, then."

Mutou blinked. "What does that..."

"There are three general classifications of anemia. If it was iron deficiency anemia, it would be microcytic hypochromic anemia. With macrocytic hypochromic anemia, that's three. Normocytic normochromic anemia occurs with acute bleeding, or possibly hemolysis, and if not that than aplastic anemia, or secondary anemia. But, in Megumi-chan's case, there weren't any particular external wounds and there were no signs of heavy internal bleeding. Total bilirubin, direct reacting bilirubin, LDH, haptoglobin--each of them are within normal parameters. That means the odds of hemolysis are low. With her high reticulocyte count, the odds of aplastic anemia are low. No problems with her other biochemical results, either."

"Haa," Mutou blinked, tilting his head. "...So, what does that mean that it was?"

"I don't know." Toshio toyed with the exam results in his hand. "I don't really know the cause. But at least what is confirmed is that it was secondary anemia. Besides sudden death, there was something wrong with some part of her body. And, that it was a big problem that couldn't be discerned from a glance. It was that problem that lead to the anemia showing."

"And so.... an example would be?"

"Like I know? Even if these results came out the day I examined her, all I'd have been able to do is a reexamination. The most I could have done is look if there was something wrong somewhere somehow with a thorough analysis but, there wasn't enough time for me to have done that and gotten any results. ---That's what it means."

Ah, Mutou said seeming slightly relieved. "Is that so?"

"This wouldn't likely have gotten any different result if I'd sent her straight to the university hospital or to a large hospital with the appropriate equipment for one of their top physicians to examine her. I mean, there were only three days until it was all over. That's why even if I were a fortune teller it wouldn't have worked. Of course, even if a fortune teller could nail the cause, they wouldn't be able to provide treatment, but."

"Then it was," Mutou said, sounding as if it were complicated. "bad luck, wasn't it."

Toshio gave an all the more bitter smile. "It's possible there were symptoms besides anemia, though. If there were, they wouldn't have been something that just started that day or the day before, though. And that little lady had a habit of kicking up a fuss any time anything felt the slightest bit off. So the people around her thought it was the usual too, took it lightly and forgot about it, probably, I'd bet. ----Well, no matter what, it's nothing but speculation, now."

Megumi was already dead. The corpse was in the ground. In the heat that had become the norm, the decay was probably already fairly far along. He didn't think Shimizu would agree to a pathological autopsy now, and literally digging up old buried bones at this point wouldn't have a point.

"This must be what they mean by a natural life span," Mutou said, shaking his head as he spoke with deep emotion. "All too short, all too out of our hands."

Toshio nodded.

"---You said it."

Part 3

Yano Tae hurried through the afterglow of the dusk. Coming to Kami-Sotoba, she visited the Gotouda household.

She peered into the house from the veranda, the thin smell of incense lingering from the inside. Gotouda Fuki who had just lost her son was bedridden in her dimly lit living room. The TV was on, empty and superficial shouts of joy flowing out. The entire scene was indeed lonely. It could only be thought of as highlighting Fuki's isolation.

"Fuki-san," her voice came from the veranda. Twice, three times it called out when Fuki finally stirred. It seemed like she had dozed off.

"...Tae-chan."

Tae spoke in a deliberately encouraging voice as Fuki tried to rise to meet her.

"I made too much for dinner again. I made it into a packed lunch, how about having it together?"

Fuki smiled and bowed her head in a nod. That movement was indeed that of an aging woman, and Tae realized a stirring in her chest. Fuki-san was getting smaller. Have we really gotten so old, she found herself thinking lately, three times more than usual.

"Sorry for the trouble all the time," Fuki smiled at Tae.

"It's fine, I just made too much is all."

Tae came up into the living room and placed the wrapped goods onto the low table, opening them up. Fuki rose to prepare the tea but the kitchen she had started towards was already cleaned up, with no signs of having prepared dinner for herself.

"...Would hot tea work, I wonder?"

"I wouldn't mind. Barley tea could be good, too."

She waited for Fuki to return to the living room. As if Fuki were worn out, something about her footsteps seemed unsteady.

"I thought you might not need me to make dinner for you but it looks like it wasn't a problem. Are you eating right?"

Fuki gave a smile that seemed forced.

"I wonder if I'm suffering from the summer heat? ... It seemed like so much work."

"That's no good, not eating like that."

"That's true," Fuki nodded. Opening the lid to the offerings, she wanted to say "it looks delicious" but she didn't seem to have much sign of an appetite. Bit by bit, Tae used her chop sticks to portion it out with her.

"....Fuki-chan, won't you move in with one of your children?" Tae asked. Shuuji had died but she still had two children left.

"My son did say for me to come," Fuki said disinterested.

"Wouldn't that be better? It's not safe, an old lady living alone."

"...I can't get motivated."

"By the time you are motivated, you might not be able to move anymore. If you're living together, If you're going to live with them, then you should try to be useful while your body's still in good condition. If you end up having to be taken care of, nobody will come to live with you."

That's true, was said again with a clear air of indifference.

"Fuki-san, you, isn't your face seeming pale?"

"Oh?" Fuki tilted her head.

"I wonder if you aren't sick? Somehow, it seems you might be."

Before she was asleep and such, and it seemed she had no appetite. Tae peered at her childhood friend's face.

"You must be worn out, yes?With two funerals, it's to be expected, yes."

Tae nodded. Funerals took a toll on the elderly. Especially when it was a family member or someone around the same age who died, a lethargy hit as if the energy were sapped out of them. More than being merely worn out by the little tasks involved, the confirmation that you were at an age where it wouldn't

be odd to die like that too brought you down.

"Are you all right?"

Fuki nodded. Her shoulders were hunched, her eyes rounded, and she shook her head feebly. The life was sucked out of her---that's how it looked to Tae.

"Wouldn't it be better to move in with somebody after all? Your will will come back."

For a while, Fuki didn't answer. She stared into her tea cup for a time, then at last let out a small murmur.

"....I'm seeing dreams of Shuuji." Fuki smiled at Tae, who bilnked. "I saw a dream that Shuuji came back to me. I wonder if Shuuji is coming to take me with him?"

"Fuki-san, that's no good, that kind of thinking."

"....It was a dream.... But, I don't want to leave the village. If I go too far away, I have the feeling I won't see any more dreams like that, so."

Fuki smiled. Tae cast her eyes down. Even if he was dead, she understood well the feeling of not wanting to go too far away from her son.

"Then, you'll have to buck up."

At Tae's words, that's true, Fuki murmured.

Part 4

Summer vacation, as usual after Bon, was an excess of spare time. Murasako Masao idly strolled out of the shop. His aging father made eyes at him as if about to say why don't you help out in the store once in a while but he didn't give him the chance to open his mouth, easing out of the store successfully.

That said, he by no means had any place in particular he was going to. In this heat, going through the trouble of getting on the bus to go hang out somewhere was too much work. Matsuo didn't have any particular lessons, nor did he go to cram school. If there was something to leave the village for, he

could find somebody to hang out with and somewhere to go but if he was making due with what was in the village, his options were limited to the Mutous. There weren't that many in the village his age. Amongst then half of them were girls, and about half of the boys were flying off to clubs or cram school. They fell into their own groups based on that, and they didn't have much interaction with those like Masao cloistered up in the village whose only ability was gossip.

Reluctantly he started towards the Mutou house. It wasn't that he particularly disliked Mutou Taomotsu or Tamotsu's family by any means but the feeling that if he went there he'd meet someone he did hate was heavy. That said there was no place else to go, and being in his own house would end up even less fun, so there was no choice.

When he went to the Mutou house, Tamotsu's lightly welcomed him. They're upstairs, she said and so he went up to Tamotsu's room where, even though it was Friday, there was Tohru there and Natsuno, too.

Clicking his tongue in his mind, he turned his gaze to Tohru.

"Tohru-chan, you're off today?"

"Yup. Post-bon vacation."

"What's this post stuff?"

"We didn't take a proper vacation during Bon itself. A different bunch claimed the break before us. So, vacations got split up into Bon and After Bon."

"That sounds sucky."

What does, Tohru laughed. "I wouldn't have dared take it. This's what you call consideration. I didn't really have anywhere to go on a trip to anyway, so I was fine without taking the extended break. Since I worked it for them now they owe me. That's an adult's secret to success in life."

That's kind of... He laughed, taking a glance towards Natsuno, who looked disinterested rolling about on Tamotsu's bed looking at a magazine.

"Oi, Natsuno." Being called out to, Natsuno glowered at Masao. Probably because he didn't like being called by his name. He fought down the feel of a

sour stomach, continuing on. "I heard you refused Megumi's mometo?"

"And?"

"That's cold, isn't it. Like, do you have some kind of emotional deficiency? Normally, who'd talk about the articles of a dead young girl like they're unclean? You don't have any sense of consideration for anyone else's feelings at all, do you?"

"What're you saying about her dying young? We could die as soon as tomorrow, too."

"That's why I'm saying, don't you feel sorry for someone who died around their first year in high school?"

"That's retarded. Humans never know when or how they're gonna die, it's all a matter of probability. Probabilities aren't concerned with personal feelings or individual traits either."

"Even if you know that, isn't it human not to think a first year high schooler would die? We'd have a lot of regrets, if we were in Shimizu's shoes."

"Being worried over something as extraneous as that's proof you're just worried about your own self. This isn't about someone else's death. I'd worry more about living your life in a way that'd leave you with regrets."

"So you think it's fine to turn down someone's old unfulfilled emotions? You're fine if you get treated like that?"

"Fine with what, if I'm dead I won't even know. Afterwards you become fields and mountains, don't they say?"

"Shimizu is crying down in her grave right now."

"You think the dead cry?"

"She might come after you with a grudge."

"Oni come for bad little children? You're too old for that kind of naivety."

Tohru smiled. "It's an old country thing. Try sharing the info. Your old man at your place'll weep tears of joy."

"....Honestly." Natsuno sighed and closed the magazine. "Then I guess I'll go home to make my old man happy."

"Sure. Later."

Raising his hand, Tohru and Tamotsu raised their hands in response, and Natsuno stepped out of the room. They could hear the light sounds of him going downstairs.

"...What a cheeky punk," Masao muttered, though Tohru nor Tamotsu gave a response. They must have heard, but instead they attentively watched what looked like an uninteresting TV program on the TV. "That's jerk, he's really cold, isn't he? Hey, Tamotsu, don't you think so?"

Tamotsu lightly taised a shoulder. "Well, it's true he comes off cool."

"He doesn't just come off that way, that's how he really is isn't it? I can't believe it, how do you guys put up with him, Tamotsu, Tohru-chan?"

"What Natsuno says has a ring of truth to it, I guess."

"Tamotsu's on his side, too?"

"That's not the problem. Even I feel sorry for Shimizu. I don't think I could take dying at that age but to tell the truth it's not really my problem. I mean, our dads know each other well and when I was younger I'd played with her, but, like. We're not at an age to play together anymore, and if we didn't go to and come home from school the same way I'd never see her. I was surprised and I felt sorry for her but it's the same kind of sorry I'd feel about something I saw in the paper, it's not like it's hard on me in any kinda way. Ah, that's too bad, is about as much as I think of it. Aren't you the same? I mean you didn't have any connection to Shimizu at all."

"That's, true, but."

"But even still, it's hard on the family and her friends, so when you meet with them, you at least make like it's hard on you, that's just being cooperative. Making Natsuno accept that's a lost cause, though."

"That's the problem, isn't it?"

"It's basically fine, ain't it? In Natsuno's case, he's consistent about it. If it was

his own parent or friend who died, like, even if other people acted like it wasn't there problem, he probably wouldn't care. That's consistent in its own way."

"Isn't that just more of a problem? If your parents die and you go to distribute their goods and someone refuses, anyone who doesn't get mad at that's not even human!"

Tohru gave a strained smile. "Natsuno might seem indifferent, but on the other hand he's rational and fair. For example, like, even if you accuse him like that, he won't try to get us on his side. He probably wouldn't tell us to get mad with him."

Told as much by Tohru, Masao's mouth warped sullenly. He had the feeling that was meant as a criticism of himself.

"Using this case as an example, if we took Natsuno's side and criticized your behavior instead, he probably wouldn't get high handed about it. The most he'd do is say leave it alone, probably. It's a problem between him and you so the rest of Sotoba can stay out of it, he'd say. When it comes to that, Natsuno's thorough."

"So that's how it's going."

"It's just an example. ---Well, since that's how he is, it's fine as it is. You, too, if Natsuno's attitude get you so mad, you don't have to get mad at every little thing. If you just don't like him, you can just ignore him, right?"

"I have to face him at all because you guys are always taking care of him. Don't pin this on me!" Masao said standing up.

"--Masao?"

"I'm leaving," he said shortly, heading down the stairs. It was like he was the one being blamed. Masao didn't have any particular interest in Natsuno. He never wanted to hang out with him, but since Tohru and the others were always looking after him he kept having run ins with him. To start with, wasn't Natsuno the one cutting in? Normally, if you didn't get along with somebody in a group, wouldn't you keep from entering into that group, but Natsuno was irritatingly shameless, and knowing that they didn't get along, Tohru and the others tacitly letting Natsuno in were irritating, too.

(Even though he's an outsider...)

Part 5

Taking the beer from the loading crate, Atsushi rang the buzzer.

"Oh my, thank you and sorry for the trouble."

He wordlessly gave the housewife who appeared the pack of canned beer and promptly turned back. Summer was always packed with delivery runs. He was constantly out and about to the point where he hated it. When he thought about how it was unpaid labor, all the more so.

Putting a check on the memo, he confirmed the next destination. There were two houses left, either of them a small distribution of either one bottle of soy sauce or two bottle of sake. If it's just a bottle or two of soy sauce, get it and bring it home yourself, he couldn't help thinking. Throwing the memo pad into the loading case, Atsushi drove off on his bike. He went by the palanquin in Monzen towards the village road. Flying down the village road without looking too closely at his surroundings, he narrowly appeared as if he'd run in with a car heading towards Kami-Sotoba. The driver turned to look back at Atsushi who had slammed on the breaks. He looked about to say something but he couldn't hear it with the window closed.

Atsushi clicked his tongue. He watched the car off with a grudge. He had half a mind to chase after the car and kick his way into it. The truth, that he had ignored the stop sign, was pushed into the back of his consciousness. When he tried to take off on his bike, the engine stalled. That made Atsushi all the more frustrated.

(I can't take this shit.)

Youth all over the world sang songs in praise of summer. Atsushi was smoldering away his own here in this country town. There wasn't anything fun, nothing to stir his chest. He got yelled at by his dad and sent running errands. As Atsushi started the engine, he looked up along the village road. He oughtta really race on up after them, drag the driver out and lay it on them. Even while

he thought that, he understood that he'd likely do no such thing.

There was no shadow of the car left. It turned off somewhere into the community of Kami-Sotoba. The road with no signs of life basked in the evening sun, stretching northward. Past here is Yamairi, Atsushi thought.

The old people died. And three people at once. One of them was a relative of Atsushi's. Seems wild dogs attacked the bodies and made a hell of a scene. He'd have liked a chance to see that, he thought. What did a dead person's body look like when all jumbled up? The late Ohkawa Gigorou was a nasty old relative of Atsushi's. With no talent for anything but finding faults in Atsushi, the doddering old far never once gave him any pocket money, never said anything but repeating his idle complaints. If he wasn't complaining about the same things, he'd be pointing out the same faults all the time. If you got annoyed and turned away he'd shout after you. His old man made an unhappy face when Gigorou visited too but Atsushi hated Gigorou, too.

That Gigorou was pulled apart and died. If he could see the corpse, he was sure he'd feel gratification. At the end of that road, wearing out the last embers of the setting sun's glow, at the end of the winding between those deep black looking fir trees. A dead Gigorou, a dead Yamairi.

Mysteriously, he couldn't pull his eyes from that road. Lately, this happened a lot to Atsushi. If he came by this area, without fail he'd end up staring like this at the road that continued into Yamairi.

(I've gotta run the deliveries.)

Drop by drop, he was again using up gas that his old man would yell at him for. Thinking of that, a sudden disgust rose in Atsushi. Why the hell was he being made to do this shit anyway, he thought. Even while thinking as much, he worried about his dad, and his gentle self put to work. Full of resentment at being made to go on deliveries like this, Atsushi impulsively turned the bike towards the northern village road. ---Where Yamairi was.

Bursting open the throttle, the end of Kami-Sotoba was close at hand. He didn't even have the time to think that he was flying. Before his eyes was the road continuing on pinched between fir trees on either side. Atsushi's speed slowed.

Gigorou was dead, torn to pieces. While he thought that sounded good to him, something sent a chill down the muscles of his back. Some kids had been talking about a dumb rumor when buying a juice at the vending machine in front of the shop. If you continued along this road, you'd come across the blood stained elderly, it went. Their whole bodies were cobbled together, with one part of the body missing. If anyone passed by, they would ask if they knew where it was.

(How stupid.)

Would Gigorou have it in him to come out warped like that? Even if he did come out, the most he could do was stand there and grumble. ---But, maybe because he'd heard that rumor, the lazily sloped hill road that lead into Yamairi felt somehow bathed in a gloomy ambiance. The firs were an umbrella over the road, and with only the rash western sun half-halfheartedly shining onto it, it felt all the darker still.

(Yamairi...)

Dead. Dead bodies. The end of the community. Uninhabited.

Were Gigorou and the other's blood stains left as they were? Were the remains of their bodies still left behind there?

His back stiffened. He could feel himself growing frightened. But that shouldn't have been the case. He wanted to prove it to himself. He wanted to try going to Yamairi.

(If have to hurry on that delivery.)

While thinking such, Atsushi slowly returned along the road. Swallowed up in the shadows of the firs, the surroundings grew quickly dark. As expected the road seemed somehow wasted away. He went about the curve and before him were firs, behind him were firs, without a sign of any people, without any passing cars.

Thhat was when suddenly something from nearby came bursting out at him. From Atsushi's left, from the bushes on the slope facing the northern mountain, something burst out as if to crash into him, and Atsushi and the bike did a barrel roll. With a terrific sound, the bottles broke, giving off the smell of soy and sake.

"What the hell!" Atsushi raised out a loud yell as his body turned. It was lucky he wasn't going very fast. Without even time to survey his surroundings, he caught sight of a nearby haggardly thin dog crouching low. Its fangs were bared, raising a growl.

"What's up, bring it!"

Atsushi swung his hand. The wild dog crouched even lower. Atsushi stood up, moving to rush towards the bike but the dog came rushing after that foot. It held the cuff of his jeans in its mouth and shook its head. He kicked his foot to get loose; just as he'd righted the bike and started the engine, a sharp pain shot through his calf. The wild dog was eating him.

Son of a bitch, he shouted out, wildly kicking his leg in desperation. The wild dog was separated from him with a searing pain. The dog crouched low again. From within the surrounding forest, the sounds of the stirring underbrush, he could hear the dog's growl. Atsushi didn't mind the particulars and took off on the bike. He was forced into a U-turn by a dog that came bursting out as if to lunge at him. From the nearby thickets another dog came flying out but he narrowly managed to avoid it.

Atsushi sped up, short of breath. The words 'son of a bitch' were murmured between his lips as he narrowly made it out into the village, hurrying back towards the shop.

Greeting him as he returned to the shop in a cold, greasy sweat was his father's jeering voice. You're late, where'd you waste the gas, he shouted, pointing to the wound on his leg. When asked what happened, without thinking he told the full story of his attack by the wild dogs when an open hand smacked out at him. On top of fucking around and bailing out on a delivery, he wasted their merchandise, his father roared with rage.

"On top of that, you get bit by the likes of a dog and come running home with your tail between your legs?! Damn, I ain't never seen no one as hopeless as your ass!"

His father said the words as if spitting them out, giving a kick to Atsushi who had sat down on the floor.

"Hurry up and get to the hospital. Far as I know, the bike ain't broken. The

cost of the merchandise is coming out of your pay!"

Part 6

On the morning of August 21st, Toshio was awoken by a single telephone. At the sound of the bell that roused him, unpleasant as it was, he woke up to take the receiver with the feeling that it was his day off, damn it. As he picked up the receiver, he realized his sense of déjà vu.

---Once, this same thing had happened. Surely, the call was to convey bad news.

"Yes, this is Ozaki." On the other end of the phone was a woman's voice. The urgency of that voice, too, was something he remembered, as expected. "Who is this?"

"This is Tamo. Kami-Sotoba's Tamo," the woman's voice was clear.

"Ah---what is it?"

Toshio sat up in bed and reached out his hand for the cigarettes by his pillow. There were many Tamos in the village, and there wasn't just one Tamo household in Kami-Sotoba either, but there was only one house that would be called "Kami-Sotoba's Tamo." That was the Kami-Sotoba's Supermarket's Tamo. Going by the voice, he wasn't talking to Tamo Satomi but to her daughter Yuuko most likely.

"The Gotouda's Fuki has died. I think that she is gone."

Toshio stopped short in his motion to light his cigarette. "----Fuki-san?"

"Early this morning Tae-san from Chigusa came, saying Fuki-san was looking bad. When I tried to go there, she was cold. It doesn't look like she's breathing, and when I tried to put my ear to her chest, I could not hear any heartbeat. Could you please come?"

"I'll be right there." Toshio abandoned his unlit cigarette in the ashtray.

"Please wait at Fuki-san's house. Try not to tamper with anything in the vicinity. ---Can you do that?"

"Yes," he heard from Yuuko as Toshio hanged up the receiver. Again, he thought. He had the feeling of having the same thing occurring before him again. Yes, indeed he had experienced this before. When it had been Gotouda Shuuji, it was exactly this same pattern.

When Toshio rushed to the Gotouda house, waiting on the front porch were Tamo Yuuko, Yuuko's father Tamo Sadaji, and the Drive-in Chigusa's Yano Tae. One side of the sliding door was left opened, Tae sitting in that small space with Yuuko and Tamo Sadaji standing on either side of her.

"Doctor." As Toshio pulled onto the lot and stood out of his car, Sadaji ran up to him. "---Sorry about this."

Nah, Toshio said looking at Tae in the corner of his eye. "Tae-san was the one to find her? Where is Fuki-san."

Tae pointed inside from the balcony. "Inside. ...In the living room."

Toshio nodded and had Tae stand. "Lead me there, please. The door is open? Did Tae-san open it?"

"No, it was opened, but. When I called there was no reply, so I went inside."

Toshio patted Tae's shoulder and gave another nod. ---It was summer, she may have left one sliding door opened to let the breeze in. It was only natural to do that in this village.

Tae stood still flustered, cutting through the living room to the entryway. Past the entryway was the inner corridor, and there was the family altar. Around the family altar was a pile of offerings. They were offerings for Shuuji who had just died before. Down the hallway separate from that was Fuki's bedroom. In that bedroom was laid out one futon, with Fuki's body stretched out within.

There was nothing particularly off around the futon, the cuff of her cotton nightwear was turned upwards but nothing seemed particularly disturbed. Her thin summer bed blanket was over her stomach as if neatly folded there. Without many signs of her sleep having been disturbed, in an instant Toshio resolved that it was not a suicide. In truth when on the road to the Gotouda

household, he had predicted as much but looking near the futon there was no cup or sign of any medication or drug about.

Sitting beside the futon and opening his medical bag, Toshio motioned for Tae to sit, too.

"Tae-san, around what time did you come?"

"Uhm, about an hour ago. When I left the house, it was about nine thirty, around then."

"You called out from the porch and came right inside, yes? ---And then?"

"I thought she wasn't doing well.... That is, on Wednesday, she had seemed ill. Sluggish, like. I was worried about that and came yesterday to see how she was doing too but when I had, she was asleep, so."

"Wednesday---the eighteenth?" Taking out his stethoscope, Toshio asked again. "She seemed sick you said, how did you mean?"

Tae shook her head, seeming troubled. "As I said, she seemed sluggish. She didn't have an appetite either. Could I say incredibly depressed, I wonder?"

"Yesterday?"

"She was asleep. I came, called out and had no answer, and when I came in she was asleep. Today just the same way, the sliding door was opened like that..."

Toshio nodded and urged her on. From the inside of Fuki's body all sounds had ceased.

"I went to her bedside and called out to her I don't know how many times until her eyes opened. She seemed so much worse than Wednesday, so I said, should we call the doctor, but. Fuki-san said no, after all. If I think about it now, she said it as if in a delirium; I asked about her futon, if it was dirty and such but didn't get any response. But, she very clearly said not to call the doctor. Just that part was very clear."

"I see."

"It was Saturday evening, I think. The hospital was closed at that time, and Fuki-san said no herself, but I thought maybe I should have you come anyway

even if she wasn't happy with it, but I thought I should see how she did until night time. She had a fever, but she did drink a few sips of water a couple of times, but she didn't take a bite of the porridge I made, just sleeping away, and I said I'd come again today and left for the night. Then, when I came again this morning, it was like this...."

"How high was her fever?" Toshio asked Tae, mildly irritated.

"It was 38.5 or abouts, wasn't it?"

"This morning, did you touch anything around here?"

No, Tae shook her head. "I called and there was no answer, and she was sort of cold. It didn't seem like she was breathing, so I thought, what has this become. I didn't know what to do! I went to the living room and thought to call an ambulance. But, they say an ambulance won't take a dead person, will they? If I called them and she was dead, there wouldn't be anything they could do, so I thought that I should call you, doctor, but then I thought she seemed dead, but it's possible she isn't actually dead! I wanted somebody to see her but it looked like the house next door was still sleeping, and going through the trouble of waking them up is, well, yes? So when I was thinking that I should ask my daughter, I went in front of Tamo and there was Yuuko-san."

Toshio let out a breath. Why didn't you tell me to look at her yesterday, why didn't you call an ambulance right away, or why didn't you at least call me yourself? There were things a plenty he wanted to say but saying any of them now after the fact would be meaningless.

"Uhm... Is Fuki-san?"

"Yep, she's dead." he ended up saying a touch coldly. ---It was the same when it was Shuuji. He couldn't suppress his irritation; why did old people these days least so much up to their own layman's judgments? If they're not looking good, why don't you have a doctor see them? Making their own suppositions based on experience, not wanting to bother the doctor, things are going bad around them and they handle it all wrong, all of that in itself just made everything worse. Yes---Murasako Mieko had been like that.

"Yesterday, did she have a cough?"

"No... Not that I noticed."

"Did she use the bathroom?"

"While I was here, she was bedridden."

"Mention any pain, say anything in particular hurt?"

Of course not, Tae said shaking her head. "If she'd said something like that, I'd have called you, Doctor! She had a fever but she seemed to just want to sleep. She said a few things as if she were delirious but, her fever wasn't high enough to be in a delirium, yes? So, she must really be that tired, I thought."

"I see," Toshio mumbled. Breath stopped, heart stopped, blood pressure zero. Her pupils were dilated and didn't contract when a light was shone in them. Rigor mortis was setting in over her entire body stiffly already.

"She died sometime last night. And not too late, either."

She died about twelve hours ago. Right around last night at ten o'clock or so, he thought.

"Oh... that's..."

Toshio moved his face near Fuki's mouth. No particular odor. As far as he could see, on what was visible of her face and limbs there were no particular external wounds or bruises. There were age spots here and there, and a few bug bites caught his eye, a few of them festering. But she did have several edema. Just in case he put his hands in her hair, feeling about but he didn't feel anything like a wound or a lump. Her cornea were not yet opaque. Her arm folded over herself was already completely stiff and couldn't be unwound. Peeling off the top of the futon, he lifted up the lower portion of her night clothes. Fuki had summer underwear on but he looked beneath that too. The skin beneath the underwear was so white it was blue, and postmortem lividity was mild but didn't give way to the touch. So it had been about twelve hours since she died. There were no traces of incontinence in her futon or her bedclothes.

Nothing particularly strange or unusual could be found. At the least, it was clear that she didn't die from an external cause, so the answer to why she died was inside of her. Right now all he could do was guess but last night, the fact

that she hadn't gone to the bathroom while Tae was there and yet there were no signs of incontinence meant something vital, he thought.

With her in the condition stated when he'd asked Tae about the last time they'd met, and with no signs of incontinence, it was extreme oliguria, or alternately anuria. Thinking what that meant with the edema, it was possibly renal failure. Guessing by her muddled mental status, he had strong suspicions about it being uremia or hyperkalemia.

Uhm, interjected Tamo Yuuko. "What's happened with Fuki-san?"

"Probably acute renal failure. ...If we do an autopsy, we'll know for sure, but."

"Is that right?"

Yuuko made a complicated expression. She looked like she didn't know whether to smile or whether to grimace. Sadaji looked the same. Most likely everybody was thinking the same thing. Fuki had just lost her son and her brother and sister-in-law. She herself was aged, and after so many successive sorrows, she seemed rather lost with herself. There was a possibility of suicide that they couldn't discount and, in reality, if she'd died by hanging it wouldn't have been all that much more unsettling.

"Fuki-san was an old girl. And every day it's been so hot. ...Heartbreak must have got to her, huh."

He spoke as if convincing himself. Age, heat, and depression had nothing to do with it; if it was renal failure and she'd been seen right away by a doctor, she might not have died like this, Toshio thought, but ultimately didn't voice.

Gotouda Shuuji, Murasako Hidemasa. Gotouda Fuki. ---All in about half a month.

Toshio left the community of Kami-Sotoba and wiped at a light sweat he'd formed.

The village is surrounded by death...

"....That's stupid."

Just what did he think was happening? Japan had a countless number of them here and there, mountain villages that were in decline and dying out, and this village didn't have one single difference to them. It wasn't some city at the

forefront of change. Everything that was here was equally harmless as it was useless. Here---there was absolutely nothing anywhere that made it necessary for anything to happen here.

But, Toshio said to himself. "...The bunch of them are getting taken out by the exact same thing."

Part 7

Seishin had just spread out his manuscripts when the phone call came. Getting it first before Ikebe who moved to take the phone, Seishin picked up the receiver. From the other end of the line, he heard Toshio's voice, sounding somehow stiff.

"Toshio, is it? What is it?"

Toshio's response was short. "Fuki-san's dead."

Seishin was momentarily lost for words and his first supposition was suicide. This summer, the old woman had lost her son and her brother. It was already the 21st of August and the sun and the wind all had the scent of fall to them. Even now the summer heat remained intense but the signs of a season's passing were clearly on the air. It wouldn't be unusual for an old woman who had suffered many losses to take stock of the past summer. That's what he'd thought.

As if reading Seishin's thoughts, Toshio continued. "But it wasn't suicide. I think it was probably acute renal failure. It was last night. ---I just got back from the Gotouda house. Yano Tae-san from Shimo-Sotoba found her."

Seishin lost his words. Something solid lingered in his throat. His own voice, replying, is that so, sounded like Toshio's, he thought. Ikebe looked back at Seishin with uncertainty.

"After I have contacted the funeral manager, I think that I will be out that way to contact you directly."

"...Got it. Thank you."

Toshio's voice as he said "Later" and hung up the phone was more devoid of emotion than necessary. Seishin didn't know how to take this news of death. He

couldn't say it was a surprise, but that said he couldn't stay calm. Perhaps, he thought, Toshio was the same.

"What's happened?" Ikebe asked Seishin who had hung up.

"It seems that the Gotouda's Fuki-san has passed away."

Eh, Ikebe started then stopped. "That wasn't, possibly...."

"He called it acute renal failure. She passed away last night but it seems she was discovered this morning."

Seeing the expression that rose on Ikebe's face, Seishin felt that Ikebe had the same thought pattern. Mitsuo was just returning to the temple office with Tsurumi; they must have sensed the strange atmosphere, as he asked if something happened. When told that Fuki had died, Tsurumi straight out asked: "It wasn't suicide, was it?" When saying it was not, he looked to Mitsuo.

"...Again, is it?"

An awkward silence hung over the temple office. The lump in Seishin's throat was precisely that. The word "again." This summer, how many reports of death had there been? And in only half a month. Shuuji, the three people from Yamairi, Megumi, Giichi, and this made seven.

"I tell you what," Mitsuo said with a heavy sigh. "It's been that kind of year. Hadn't it been like this before?" Mitsuo said, then wore a strained smile as if realizing something. "Ah, the Junior Monk was still small then, you can't remember?"

"It had been." The one who agreed was Tsurumi. "It was more than twenty years ago, wasn't it? In the rainy season there was a flash flood, and it started when two children were washed away by the riverbed. Back then the incidents continued. There was nothing but accident after accident at the waterfront."

"Right, right, we lost the former head monk that year too, at the beginning of the fall season."

Mitsuo said emotionally; Tsurumi's eyes widened.

"That's, a terribly ominous statement. Mitsuo-san."

"Ah, no---I'm very sorry. That's not how I'd meant it."

Ikebe questioned mildly. "Uhm.... Was what happened with the Predecessor also a water related accident?"

Seishin wore a bitter smile. "No. It was stomach cancer."

Staring at Ikebe's face, who looked like he wanted to say 'that's all?', Seishin felt self-derision in his heart. Yes--that was all it was. Misfortunes, at least in some fashion or other, never ceased. Even if everything which happened was a matter of probability, they didn't happen uniformly. But, unpleasantness left a strong impression on people. People's death, of all things, was the utmost example thereof.

Even if when looking at it in the long term everything went according to reasonable probabilities, it had the impression that it was a strange string of events, and once you had that impression, that preconception's ability to warp reality was striking. Tsurumi had said "accident after accident at the water front," but the reality of it was that Seishin's grandfather was lost to stomach cancer, and while certainly Tsurumi of all people shouldn't have forgotten that, the impression of "accident after accident at the water front" had eclipsed and made hazy his awareness.

Seishin let out a breath. Death occurred randomly. Events occurred in isolation, there wouldn't always be a sure connection. But, people's minds gathered those discontinuous occurrences together and bestowed them meaning, connection. It wasn't that there "was" meaning but that meaning was conferred. For example, constellations; in fact they were merely stars with no relation to anything, between which people agreed on the supplementary lines in order to give the constellations meaning; it was similar to that phenomenon.

The deaths were not serialized, they were just manifesting in a way that left the impression of continuity. Fuki, too, was near seventy. Already in advanced age, she had made arrangements for her own grave herself, as an old woman who was already having the life slip out of her bit by bit. And further still was the severity of this summer, there wasn't just the intense heat, but the loss of her son, the loss of her brother, making it, for Fuki, an emotionally insufferable summer. Her body would have begun failing even without that, and going through the crisis back to back like that must surely have worn her down. Losing her brother and son surely also had her depressed.

There was nothing particularly suspicious about it, a reasonable death----.

While thinking that never the less, he realized something within trying to convey something to himself.

(But, what?)

Seishin reflected on his thoughts and then found the unease within himself. It was that which he felt when it was Megumi. Something felt very improper about it. The bad premonition he'd had when it was Giichi's time. He was sure to be faced by circumstances that were by no means reasonable or natural, thus all the more reason why he had to eagerly tell himself that it was valid and proper.

(....Is that what it was?)

As if to voice consent to that realization, he felt something queer sinking in his gut. It was Fuki wasn't it, Seishin thought. ---Not Shimizu nor Hiroko, nor even Tokrou. Facing the desk, Seishin remembered clearly the day of Megumi's service. Looking older than their years (It would be best to be prepared), Tokurou and Hiroko. Their backs hunched and rounded like Gotouda Fuki's. Shimizu patting Tokurou's back (as if clinging), his eyes cast sharply down. Huddling together, bearing against the unreasonable shock they'd suffered, the strange sense of dread that could be felt from them.

---When children cry the oni come.

Not Shimizu, nor Hiroko nor Tokurou.

It was Gotouda Fuki.

Yes, Ohkawa Gigorou died, Murasako Hidemasa died, Mieko died. Shuuji died, and Fuki fell to it. There was no sense hierarchy to it. Just as Shuuji fell to death before Fuki did, just as Megumi fell to it. It was just, ---spreading.

Contamination, the word sprung to mind. Sudden, unforeseen death. That death was contaminating nearby relatives.

Shimizu was well. He hadn't heard talk of Hiroko or Tokurou collapsing either. Mieko fell to it, Fuki fell to it. Hidemasa's wife, Shuuji's mother. And Giichi. Those with no resistance, in close contact.

Seishin clenched his fist. ---An epidemic.

Closed off land, a society made up of only those within, intricate regional and familial bonds, the custom of burying their dead.

Once that spread the village would be, beyond a doubt, annihilated.

Chapter 9 Translation Notes

Chapter 9 - 1

Posthumous names - Honorary Ingou

A posthumous name is assigned to denote one as a follower of Buddha, originally for those entering the priesthood and taking certain vows. Now they are written on sotoba, mortuary tablets and the like to assist in their passing to the next shore, by carrying the honor or good works within their name and having that be what they are identified by so that they aren't lured back to the world of the living when spoken about by their original name, as well as to help them spiritually separate from their former life and material world. The name is assigned by the family temple's head priest or, if one doesn't belong to any particular parish, a monk from the funeral service will assign one. It's generally made up of two characters, and optionally honorary titles such as Ingou, Dougou, Igou, and others varying by sect. There are specific rules as to which characters can be used, determining prefixes and suffixes based on age, gender, sect, *etc.* as well as denotations written before or after on certain relics, which vary by sect. As there are quite a few rules in place which require some thorough study to assign titles appropriately, there is a charge, which is the source of some controversy.

Ingou - In is an honorary title consisting of two characters and the third character "in" (院), for temple, put at the beginning of the posthumous name, before the two on a standard name. It's reserved for those who were central to a temple or performing great works for the public good. It was originally reserved for emperors or those of high government houses who erected temples.